

The Role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Relations with Muslims from 1920 to 2020

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Abstract. Relations between Orthodox and Muslims in the Western Balkans often become a world-class topic due to the interest of international factors actively involved in this process. The Serbian Orthodox Church is a key factor in the development of interfaith dialogue, to which it has made a significant contribution through its primates, bishops and priests. Her role came to the fore in the post-war years, when, despite great sacrifices among Orthodox believers, she called for interfaith peace and coexistence, thereby contributing to the stability of the Western Balkans. In historical retrospect, the article examines the relations of peoples and representatives of different religions in one common state in political circumstances. The facts presented in the article allow us to draw conclusions about the level of interfaith dialogue and the contribution of representatives of various faiths to interfaith reconciliation. The article is an experience of a comprehensive scientific study of interreligious relations between Orthodox and Muslims in Serbia: when writing it, the researcher turned to various sources: Christian and Muslim religious and apologetic literature, history, sociology, journalism, etc., aiming at an impartial presentation of the most accurate and diverse information on this topic.

Keywords: Serbian Orthodox Church, Islamic communities, Europe, Western Balkans, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, interfaith coexistence, dialogue and conflicts

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Introduction

Relations between Orthodox Christians and Muslims in the Western Balkans have been burdened by difficult historical experiences for centuries, and the “stumbling block” to further development of their relations is the reinterpretation of historical facts. Often, conflicts and crimes on religious and national grounds are chosen to build a historical narrative, while examples of solidarity and goodwill remain in the “shadows”.

Every crime deserves condemnation, every victim deserves a dignified memory, and every humane act deserves to be celebrated [7:18-23]. The Serbian Orthodox Church has been a factor of reconciliation and rapprochement, despite the difficult external and internal influences.

Materials and Methods

Information about the relations between the Orthodox and Muslims before the first half of the 20th century can be found only in general historical works, personal notes, letters, folk songs and chronicles of the Orthodox and Muslim clergy. Of all the historians and chroniclers who lived from the 14th to the 20th centuries and wrote about the relations between the Orthodox and Muslims, the works of the following authors deserve special attention: Archimandrite Seraphim (Ristic), Archimandrite Nichifor (Ducic), Jovan N. Tomic, Jovan hadzi Vasiljevic, Dr. Evto Dedijer, Jovan Cviic, Konstantin Jireček, Vladimir Ćorović, Bey Esad. They give us reliable and objective information about the current historical situation in both the conquered and liberated Serbian lands, because they themselves were direct witnesses to individual events described. However, the issues of interreligious relations are not sufficiently covered in the works.

The relationship between Orthodox and Muslims in Serbia has been dealt with to a greater extent by Christian rather than Muslim authors. Consequently, the main information on this topic is available in Serbian and Russian.

More attention to interreligious relations in the territory of the former Yugoslav republics began to be paid by Orthodox theologians, political scientists, journalists, politicians and lawyers only after the 1980s. Among the sources of this period, the works of Rajk Veselinović, Djoki Slijepčević, Bishop Afanasije (Jevtić), Milorad Ekmečić, Mirođub Jevtić, Dmitrije Bogdanović, Dušan Bataković, Radoslav Gaćinović, Milan Mijalkovsky, Borislav Pelević, etc. stand out.¹

A great contribution to the study of relations between the Orthodox and Muslims

¹ Veselinović L. R. History of the Serbian Orthodox Church with National History, Vol.II (1766-1941). Belgrade, 1966; Ekmečić M. War goals of Serbia 1914 Belgrade, 1973; Atanasije (Jevtić), hieromonk. From Kosovo to Jadovno. Belgrade, 1984; Atanasije (Jevtić), hieromonk. The suffering of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija from 1941 to 1990. Priština, 1990; Bogdanović Dimitrije. A book about Kosovo. Belgrade, 1990; Bataković T. Dušan. Kosovo and Metohija. Priština-Gornji Milanovac, 1991; Atanasije (Jevtić), Bishop. The Serbian Church in the Second World War, (from the archives of SV. The Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church). Belgrade, 1992.; Tanaskovic Darko. In dialogue with Islam. Belgrade, 1992. And Peace of Mind. Shiites and Islam. Prnjavor, 1995; Bataković T. Dušan. Kosovo and Metohija in Serbian-Albanian relations. Belgrade-Valjevo-Srbij, 1998; Mijalkovski Milan, Ph. D. crimes and delusions of Albanian separatists. Belgrade, 1999; Jevtić Mirođub. Jihad as a war. Belgrade, 2001; Jevtić Mirođub. Religion and politics. Belgrade, 2002; Slijepčević đ, Ph. D. history of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Book II. Belgrade, 2002; Gaćinović Radoslav, Ph. D. violence in Yugoslavia. Belgrade, 2002; Gaćinović Radoslav, PhD. kidnapping of Kosovo and Metohija. Belgrade, 2004; Pelević Borislav. Through the history of Kosovo and Metohija from VI to XXI century. Belgrade, 2005.



was made by Bishop Afanasije (Jevtic), who, having access to the archives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, published in his works every document testifying to interreligious life in Serbia throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.²

Results

After the end of World War I, one large multinational state was created in the Western Balkans – the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which existed under this name from 1918 to 1921, and later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from 1921 to 1941. Its citizens were Orthodox, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Protestants and others.

The Serbian Orthodox Church, governed by the Holy Council of Bishops and headed by Serbian Patriarchs Dimitrije (Pavlovic) from 1920 to 1930, Varnava (Rosic) from 1930 to 1937 and Gavril (Dožić) from 1938 to 1950, supported the idea of establishing brotherhood, unity and equality of all peoples and representatives of different religions in one common state. The evangelical mission of the Orthodox clergy, which involves preaching love, peace and coexistence among all peoples, coincided with the state policy of establishing equality among all its peoples, regardless of ethnicity and religion. Many challenges and problems arose along this path, which remained without adequate political solutions, but the Serbian Orthodox Church was never a destructive factor [4:23-181].

The primates, bishops and priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church called on Orthodox Christians to live in mutual love with followers of other faiths in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which was the only country in Europe where Sharia was applied at the state level from 1919 to 1941, although Muslims constituted slightly more than ten percent of the population. The greatest danger to interfaith coexistence was posed by extremist elements among Catholics and Muslims, inspired by separatist clerical-nationalist interests. During the Second World War, under the guise of religious and national interests, they mercilessly exterminated their neighbors, including defenseless old people, women and children. The largest number of victims in this war were Orthodox Serbs, who were subjected to ethnic cleansing in many regions where they had lived for centuries together with Muslims, especially in Kosovo and Metohija and Bosnia and Herzegovina [7].

After the end of World War II, power in Yugoslavia passed to the communists, who resumed work on “brotherhood and unity” in the context of a secular social order. The Serbian Orthodox Church supported the state, although it was dissatisfied with the laws that determined its institutional status and position in the state, and the attitude of state authorities towards the Orthodox clergy and believers.

Upon his return from captivity, Serbian Patriarch Gavril found himself in an extremely difficult situation, but did not stray from the path of interfaith coexistence. He was replaced by Serbian Patriarch Vikentije (Prodanov) (1950 to 1958), who earned official

² Atanasije (Jevtić), hieromonk. The suffering of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija from 1941 to 1990. Prishtina, 1990; Atanasije (Jevtić), Bishop. The Serbian Church in the Second World War, (from the archives of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church).

support from the Islamic Religious Community of Yugoslavia for his interfaith activities; the communist government was also satisfied with his activities [4: 181-195].

Serbian Patriarch German (Djoric), who was the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church from 1958 to 1990, continued to promote institutional interfaith cooperation with Muslims, maintaining official and personal friendly contacts with the three heads of the Islamic religious community in Yugoslavia: Reis-ul-Ulema Hadži Sulejman Efendi Kemur (1957–1975), Reis-ul-Ulema Naim Efendi Hadžiabdić (1975–1987) and Reis-ul-Ulema Hadži Hafiz Hussein Efendi Muić (1987–1989). His correspondence shows that he respected all Muslims and their religious holidays. He saw the Muslims of Yugoslavia as his brothers, with whom he always wanted to be on good terms. In this context, the interfaith activities of many bishops and priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church during his time were carried out [2].

The turning points in Christian-Muslim relations in the Balkans in the late 20th and early 21st centuries occurred when Serbian Patriarch Pavle (Stojčević) was on the patriarchal throne of the Serbian Orthodox Church from 1990 to 2009. He had no opportunity to work on developing interfaith dialogue in theological terms due to the state of war and political turbulence. He was not afraid to talk about the theological differences between Christianity and Islam and, despite the difficulties, used every opportunity to talk with Muslim religious figures, promoting dialogue to preserve interfaith coexistence [1].

During his patriarchal service, representatives of Orthodox Christians and Muslims met and discussed political issues with the aim of preserving interfaith coexistence in peace and mutual respect. They met many times to discuss the difficulties they blamed on each other, when one side felt the other had not made efforts to prevent crimes. Their conversations were useful in that they could “face to face” their pain over the suffering of believers, and work together to solve this or that problem [3].

The Serbian Orthodox Church, led by Serbian Patriarch Irinej (Gavrilovic) (2010 to 2020) and diocesan bishops, continued to work on developing interfaith dialogue for reconciliation in regions affected by civil wars (1991-1995 and 1999), strengthening coexistence in regions where Orthodox Christians and Muslims already live peacefully [4].

During the time of Patriarch Irinej, the bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church also made considerable efforts to develop peaceful and harmonious interfaith coexistence, and their contribution to dialogue with Muslims was significant [6].

Metropolitan Nikolaj of Dabro-Bosnia (1928-2015), leading the Sarajevo-based metropolitanate during the breakup of Yugoslavia and the civil war in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995), lost a large number of Orthodox believers, but remained committed to interfaith dialogue and reconciliation. He worked in this direction even in old age [6:20-32].

Metropolitan Porfirije of Zagreb-Ljubljana (current Patriarch of Serbia) was focused on interreligious dialogue with the Catholics who make up the majority of the inhabitants of the Zagreb-Ljubljana Metropolitanate, but he also worked on dialogue with Muslims in both the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Serbia. He achieved great success through openness and honesty in discussions with representatives of other churches and religious

communities. He also participated in numerous regional interfaith conferences [6:34-46].

Metropolitan Chrysostom of Dabro-Bosnia, first as Bishop of Zvornica-Tuzla and then as Metropolitan of Dabro-Bosnia, held regular meetings with representatives of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, encouraged interfaith coexistence, resolved open issues in Christian-Muslim relations [6:51-82].

Bishop Irinej of Bačka achieved a high level of communication with Muslims at the regional and international level. He did not have a significant percentage of Muslims among the population of his diocese, but his attitude towards them as a minority was full of respect and understanding. He was a frequent participant in interfaith meetings, and his views on Islam and Muslims are known in the media space of the Republic of Serbia and the Western Balkans. His contribution to the dialogue with Muslims can be seen in: development of interfaith projects of general significance, participation in interfaith meetings and conferences, press releases on interfaith initiatives and events at the regional and international level, statements about Islam and Muslims in magazines and newspapers, etc. [6:99-160].

Bishop Photius of Zvornica and Tuzla, in his archpastoral work in the diocese, where Muslims live together with Orthodox Christians, emphasized the importance of interfaith coexistence in meetings with representatives of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Muslim political figures. In his public speeches, he spoke about the importance of interfaith reconciliation, emphasizing that even in the history of Christian-Muslim relations in the Diocese entrusted to him there are striking examples left by people who, in the most difficult moments, showed themselves to be good neighbors, regardless of the conditions of war and despite differences in religion and nation [6:167-174].

Bishop Atanasije of Mileševa, who was previously Bishop of Bihać-Petrovac, worked to maintain good interfaith relations in both the Muslim-majority and Orthodox Christian-majority diocese. He demonstrated a commitment to the essence of interfaith dialogue as he sought the path of peace between Muslims and Orthodox, emphasizing that peace is complete only if it comes from within and is confirmed by actions [6:177-201].

Bishop Gregory initiated interfaith dialogue in his diocese at all levels and in all social circles; scientific meetings, cultural events, media appearances, sports competitions, etc. Bishop Gregory expanded the scope of understanding and application of interfaith dialogue, which as a process has become a benchmark in the social and political development of all nations. Interfaith dialogue became a popular social phenomenon, not just a tool for promoting interfaith coexistence. Many of his clergy followed him in this, so that the fruits of his work can be seen on many levels in Bosnia and Herzegovina [6:206-276].

Bishop Teodosije of Raška and Prizren initiated a process of interfaith reconciliation in a predominantly Muslim environment, despite hundreds of thousands of Orthodox Christians expelled over the past fifty years and many destroyed churches and monasteries. In his sermons and statements, he often spoke about the Christian-evangelical principle of love for all. After frequent attacks by Albanian Muslims on Orthodox Christians and their shrines, he emphasized repentance and the normalization of broken interreligious relations in this Serbian province [6:287-299].

Bishop Serge of Bihać and Petrovac contributed to the development of dialogue with Muslims through his sermons and public speeches, in which he called for peace and love in an environment where Muslims had become a majority compared to Orthodox Christians after the terrible crimes and ethnic cleansing during the Second World War. He was guided by the Gospel story of the “good Samaritan”. His archpastoral mission was to create a new environment in Christian-Muslim relations, in which there is equal remembrance of the victims of the conflict and opportunities for building a common future in harmonious coexistence [6:300-305].

Bishop Dimitrije of Zahum and Herzegovina took a step forward by paying tribute to the innocent victims of the Orthodox and Muslims together with the representatives of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A new stage in interfaith relations began when the Diocese and the Muftiate began to help each other in various needs. He publicly declared his readiness to fight for interfaith coexistence by all available and legal means, showing the society that he does not avoid discussing even the most sensitive topics in interfaith relations [6:306-331].

Bishop Vasilije of Zvornica and Tuzla led the Diocese during the period of communist “supervision” of interfaith relations, then during the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the post-war period, when he faced many open issues in interfaith relations. He distinguished himself with his valuable work in the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In his public speeches he stated that there is no alternative to interfaith dialogue and that we must work in this direction at all levels of social, religious, cultural and political life, and that success is determined by joint, mutual efforts and work [6:335-353].

Conclusion

After the First and Second World Wars, as well as after the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia, the Serbian Orthodox Church actively participated in interfaith dialogue with Islamic communities and Muslims at all levels. The Primates and clergy of the Church made a significant contribution to interfaith reconciliation and coexistence, despite the fact that Orthodox Christians were victims of occupation regimes with which the Muslim political elite collaborated. Attempts to provoke a negative reaction of the Serbian Orthodox Church in relations with Muslims never bore fruit, since the Church always preached that Muslims are brothers to the Orthodox.

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