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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_sbct-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php)

## **Stumbling-blocks to Ecumenism in the Balkans\***

ANNE HERBST

Emissaries from all over the world are coming to try to reconcile us with one another, but they have no success.

*Patriarch Pavle of the Serbian Orthodox Church in his 1992  
Christmas message*

Before applying the keyword 'reconciliation' to the Balkans we ought to mention some far more appropriate vocabulary: 18 months after the Dayton Accord was signed, descriptions of the state of affairs in the former Yugoslavia still commonly include words such as 'bitterness', 'hatred', 'rage', 'resentment', 'fear' and 'suspicion'. The difficult task faced by the peoples of the former Yugoslavia – alongside reconstruction – is the struggle of each individual to come to terms with his own inner turmoil and defensiveness, to allow himself to start communicating once again. Many people have either completely suppressed all emotion or else are hatching new plans for revenge.

We could ask why it was that the powder keg exploded in the Balkans – after all, neighbouring states also had to cope with insecurity and the pressures of individual responsibility after the collapse of communism in eastern Europe. They too sought refuge in the new religion of nationalism. However, Yugoslavia's heaviest burden is to be found in its recent past, which was simply ignored by Tito's state. The history of the Second World War — with its war on three fronts in the Balkans – was never dealt with. A serious figure for concentration camp victims of the Croatian *Ustaša* state was never established, nor was the role played by Serbian *Četnik* partisans or the acts of revenge committed by Tito partisans ever scientifically documented. The old Yugoslavia only appeared to have solved the nationalities question. All these issues were made taboo, and this led to an egocentric handling by each nation of its own history as Yugoslavia fragmented. After the 'change' new stereotypes of the enemy were heaped onto the experiences and clichés of the history that had not been addressed, and propagandistic self-depiction produced a misguided consciousness in each people.

There is also the question of the ideological influence of the churches, which in our context is more important than religion as such. Under self-management socialism the churches were the only institutions preserving national identity. The

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churches have inherited a nationalistic exaggeration of their own ecclesiology – that is, of the role played by their church and hierarchy in the national tradition. This is especially true of the Serbs, who today still hold to a mixture of myth, history and Orthodox theology as a result of their historical experience under Ottoman rule. Meanwhile the Catholic Church in Croatia has stressed the role of the nation in shaping Croatian identity, while religion is understood as universal, its power extending beyond national boundaries.

What fills us with horror, however, in this war is the inordinately virulent agitation which preceded every war crime and which increased after every new crime, until the aforementioned apathetic numbness set in, away from which only a path many generations long guided by the socio-psychological model of ‘contact creates sympathy’ can lead. Here we recall that it has taken 50 years for the relationship between Germans and Jews to start to ease.

### **Catalogue of Demagogy**

In order that we should understand that there was not only a propaganda machine at work which poisoned the climate between the churches, but also something being cultivated deep in people’s minds, I would like to present in a sort of ‘list of sins’ the striking features which convey how the Christian churches in the Balkans (or was it mainly only one?) took part in the escalation, or incitement, of violence in the recent tragedy. From long before the war until well after the Dayton Accord had been signed, both major churches, Catholic and Orthodox, produced an extensive arsenal of spoken and written statements to accompany the conflict between the Balkan peoples. A comparative analysis of the church press and its commentaries, official statements and communiqués and the resolutions of bishops’ conferences and synods has still not been undertaken. With the aid of the assessments of church-political events in the Balkans produced by *Glaube in der Zweiten Welt* in the publication of the same name we can nevertheless draw together examples for the period in question which reveal the potential for demagogy and pathological self-defensiveness with which the churches tried to deal with their own conflict in this war.

The following is a list of those basic attitudes and modes of behaviour with which the western churches find themselves confronted when they attempt to mediate.

- (1) Religious–cultural and ethnic differences between the confessions, and therefore nations, are absolutised. As these differences are depicted as unbridgeable, and therefore irreconcilable with peaceful coexistence, the churches too are led into confrontation.
- (2) Political concepts are sacralised in order to elevate them to an emotional and religious level, thus suppressing criticism. For example, ‘holy Croatia’, ‘God and the Croats’, ‘God, defend the Serbs’, ‘Kosovo – holy heritage of Serbianism’, ‘our holy war goes on’, ‘the holy will of the nation to wage war’.
- (3) A Manichaeanism which, following the principle of the radical apportioning of blame, sees one’s own religion as the personification of goodness and that of the other as the embodiment of evil. The Adventists are ‘religious ravagers’, ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing’ with their ‘soul-destroying propaganda’; the Vatican is the source of ‘Roman Catholic rampage’. According to the Orthodox view so-called ‘heretics’ and ‘schismatics’ (Catholics and Protestants) do not, by definition, have valid sacraments or a eucharist. Their only escape is ‘to convert to the true Orthodox Church of Christ in full penitence’. Such an elitist view corresponds with aggressive anti-

ecumenism and an antiwestern position – both of which are factors which have made access by western churches enormously difficult.

(4) The history of one's nation is interpreted in terms of martyrology, a special role in the context of efforts to realise one's own superior worth. Phrases such as the following are typical: 'the special chosen status of the Serbian people', 'we are crucified with Christ', 'nailed to the cross for the fourth time', 'we suffered under the Turks longer than Christ suffered on the cross', 'our millions of martyrdoms for Orthodoxy', 'for the third time this century the Orthodox are victims of mass murder' (the first in the *Ustaša* state, the second under Tito in Kosovo, and the third the exodus from Krajina); 'our Golgotha', 'the elimination of an entire people', the 'self-sacrifice of the Serbs to Croatian genocide and the Muslim plan for world domination', 'we are the Palestinians of Europe' (Metropolitan Jovan (Pavlović) of Zagreb, Ljubljana and all Italy). Just as dubious are the constantly-repeated 'direct parallels between the persecution and murder of the Jewish people by Nazi Germany and the atrocities committed, then and now, against the Serbs'.

(5) One's own nation is viewed as a sort of 'primeval people', with eternal characteristics which transcend history: an ethnos/demos concept based partly on theology, which sees historical clichés elevated to a religious plane – for example, 'the place of the Serbs in God's plan of salvation' or 'the people of God within the church', 'the three basic ethnic-psychological characteristics of the Serbian people – readiness for sacrifice, endurance and invincibility'.

(6) One's own delusions and fears are interpreted as the result of evil conspiracies by others against one's own confession: for example, 'the united forces of the Vatican and the Muslims' intend to 'wipe out the Serbs, to destroy them completely', and this 'only because of their Orthodox faith'. There is polemic against 'so-called human rights' in whose name 'the West isolates and condemns whole peoples – for example, Serbia. What Hitler and Stalin did was more humane than what the western community of nations is now doing. Hitler and Stalin suppressed particular groups of people, but never the whole population of particular territories.' (These are the words of Bishop Irinej of Bačka at an ecumenical conference in Feketić (Vojvodina) in 1995. He is here in Graz as an ecumenical delegate of the Serbian Orthodox Church.)

(7) In connection with point 6 one can observe a collective phenomenon known to psychologists as 'projection'. According to this, one's own negative characteristics or actions are seen as belonging to the other side, and in this war these are predominantly described in aggressive or military terms. For example, because in the eyes of the Serbian Orthodox Church the Balkan war is a 'defensive war' and a 'war of liberation' even the patriarch constantly refers to the other side as 'our enemies' or 'the criminals', whom one should not, however, 'pay back in kind'. Metropolitan Jovan sees the Catholic Church engaging 'in a campaign' against Orthodoxy, and Bishop Danilo (Krstić) of Budapest believes the Serbs to be the object of a 'papal crusade' and 'an Islamic jihad'. Even obvious causality is reversed so that the 'others' are carrying out 'genocide', 'mass murder' and 'ethnic cleansing'; 'it was the Muslims who raped Serbian women – after all, they abolished polygamy only quite recently.'

### **Western Blindness to State Messianism**

By analogy such concepts are reflected in contemporary ecclesiology, which continued to be published in church publications and taught in theological faculties even after the war started. With its mixture of theology, myth and history, this type of

instruction is an age away from mutual ecumenical understanding, and continues to be influential due to its strong semantic anchoring in everyday language.

It is striking that almost all utterances of this type come from the top hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and only a few come from the Roman Catholic side. The leadership of the Catholic Church of Croatia has not had an ideologically-supported 'counterpart' to all this, apart from certain nationally-coloured, triumphalistic utterances among the lower clergy, or in some Franciscan press organs, which for the most part, however, manage not to resort to a demonised stereotype of the enemy.

On the international level, these tragically intertwined confessions in the Balkans faced churches which were themselves unwilling or unable to free themselves from various pressures and subjective preconceptions in this conflict. It is in this very respect that numerous doubts have arisen about the integrity and honesty of an ecumenism in which traditional preferences, old connections or subjective theological sympathies have usually got the better of moral requirements. Thus the reactions to this war on the part of the international ecumenical community have been important in revealing the respective interests of the member churches.

### **War Also Divides Churches**

As relations between Serbs and Croats worsened both Christian churches at first turned to one another of their own accord: the Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Pavle and the Croatian primate Cardinal Kuharić appealed to both peoples early in 1991 to look for 'a humane and Christian way to a just resolution' and 'not to fall for the propaganda of hatred'. In their first encounter since 1968 the delegations of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference met in Sremski Karlovci in May 1991, where they described themselves as 'sister churches' for the first time and proclaimed 'nonviolence and tolerance ... as the only possible future course'. Another meeting of the two heads of the churches in Slavonski Brod (Croatia), at which all the Catholic and Orthodox bishops of the affected region were present, concluded with a more timid statement, due to the intensification of hostilities. At the last minute only one institution outside Yugoslavia, the Catholic foundation 'Pro Oriente', tried to prevent the polarisation between Orthodox and Catholics: it got both churches to accept an undertaking in Vienna not to attack each other in the media, to set up ecumenical councils in each diocese and to let ecumenism influence theological education, religious instruction and adult education. A mixed team of historians was to work through the burdens of the past and lead the way to an acknowledgment of guilt on both sides and requests for forgiveness as a result. This first externally-initiated undertaking was interrupted by the war. In summer 1996 it was resumed in Vienna by all participants from Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia, albeit with certain reservations.

The gulf between the churches finally opened with the outbreak of war as the Belgrade Patriarchate and top Serbian politicians discussed plans 'for the survival of the Serbian people'. Isolated ecumenical prayers in Belgrade for peace and against 'violence and war as a means of policy', as well as the criticism from the ranks of Serbian believers that their own church was driving the people into a war of aggression, were no longer able to halt the change of course of the Orthodox Church.

### **Top-Level Church Diplomacy**

Now five years of 'reconciliation tourism' for western churches really set in: the four

Geneva church unions<sup>1</sup> started shuttling between Belgrade, Zagreb and Sarajevo. The Vatican and all its Roman Catholic national churches, as well as Lutheran and Reformed churches, working either alone or with other confessions, jostled to prevent total eruption of antagonistic interests amongst Christians and Muslims as well. However, meetings at the highest level and unanimous declarations and assurances of their peaceful intentions were no longer able to influence the course of events.

The question remains whether the Balkan churches declared their mission of peace sufficiently persistently, credibly, and above all, early. There was criticism that appeals for peace in Croatia barely reached ordinary believers. Several Croatian requests for dialogue in November 1990 were turned down by the Serbian church leadership. The Serbian church leadership acted counterproductively; indeed, in my opinion it intentionally followed a double strategy: the Orthodox Church could therefore hardly expect common appeals for peace to be taken seriously by society when the patriarch and many of his bishops were simultaneously carrying out an inordinately virulent campaign against Croatia and its Catholic Church, as well as the Vatican, on account of the crimes committed by the Croatian *Ustaša* state 50 years before. The attitude of the Serbian church towards western governments, the EU, the UN and so on, which were generally suspected of encouraging the breakup of Yugoslavia, was similarly equivocal. Even at international ecumenical conferences, such as the Tenth General Assembly of the Council of European Churches (CEC) in Prague in 1992, Serbian bishops appeared with Janus-faced statements: they would, for example, state that not only the West but 'all are guilty and all are victims', only to declare immediately afterwards that the Serbs were the true victims. According to the bishops the Serbs faced a 'new genocide' from Croats and Muslims. As a result, according to Bishop Danilo (Krstić) of Budapest at that time, Serbian Orthodox Christians had a vested 'right and duty to kill'.

### **The Ambiguous Role of the Western Ecumenical Community**

As a result of this ambivalence the international ecumenical organisations felt all too hastily obliged to act as go-betweens, telling each party what they wanted to hear. As the Serbian Orthodox side became increasingly radical it eventually became clear to all partners in the talks that the will to keep to common agreements was completely absent. As a result all statements and appeals by future ecumenical dialogues lost credibility and thus any effect on the hostile parties.

However, it was the image of ecumenism offered by the top-level diplomacy just beginning which was most symptomatic. For it was to turn out that interests in their own ranks indeed ran parallel to those political and confessional trenches which had been demarcated during the war, as those interests were also determined by their own members.

The large ecumenical umbrella organisations in Geneva found themselves in a double trap in their mediation between churches and confessions in the Balkan war. The church leaderships in the former Yugoslavia were divided along lines parallel to the political, ethnic and confessional divisions. The WCC and the Council of European Churches came up against a militant, theologically-supported anti-ecumenism from one of its own members – the Serbian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, research into the reasons for the hostility between the opposing churches in the Yugoslav war was not carried out in Geneva because of ostensible 'endangering of ecumenical interests' (for which read: consideration of one's own

clients). The churches were not helped to break through the close nationalistic relationship with their respective peoples and there was no insistence upon a confession of their own collective responsibility for the climate of war. The Balkan Catholics were not members of the structures in Geneva, and so did not have a corresponding counterweight there. The Council of European Catholic Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) took part in the activities of CEC only in a supplementary capacity. In consequence the Catholics had to find their own path.

As a result of all this the Genevan ecumenical effort to achieve harmony only prevented contact between the confessions in the Balkans from breaking off completely. The noncommittal declarations of the interconfessional summit meetings can hardly be said to have shown the way to reconciliation. As a result a learning process could not take place among the participants. Instead, fear of conflict on the part of the mediators led to an endurance test in the face of criticism from some of their Protestant members. Today the only successes are solo attempts at independent individual initiatives for ecumenical encounter at a local level, and these are based on contacts sought and found at grass-roots level during the war itself.

### **Serbian Orthodox Priests Call on their Church to Leave the WCC**

What one Balkan church thinks of the World Council of Churches, of which it is itself a member, is clear from the following quotation:

By our participation in the so-called 'Dialogue of Love' we are being forced to the brink of a false Christian unity ... one cannot pray with heretics and schismatics as this leads to a new spiritual Babylon ... If you understand this you must leave this doomed arrangement (*kompozicija*) as soon as possible, while there is still time!

These words were spoken right at the beginning of the Yugoslav war in summer 1991, and the recommendation to leave the WCC appeared at that time in the official newspaper of the Belgrade Patriarchate. Four years later that church continues to decry 'papal-Protestant ecumenism with its pseudochurch and pseudochristianity'. Texts of this nature were discovered among a stock of polemical leaflets discovered by Croatian commandos in the Orthodox church of Jasenovac during the reoccupation of western Slavonia in May 1995.

Evidence that a significant number of Serbian Orthodox clergy do not appear to have changed their views even a year after the Dayton Accord is supplied by the bishop of Kosovo. In this oldest and most recent centre of conflict in the Balkans there is no promise of Christian partnership even in an area that is 90 per cent Muslim. For Bishop Artemije (Radosavljević) 'ecumenism' is nothing more than 'a figment of the imagination of that same Biblical serpent which told our ancestors in Paradise that they could be like gods – not with God's help, however, but against God, with the support of the devil'. According to the bishop, ecumenists today want to forge Christian unity, but 'not on the basis of truth and in truth, but through compromise, lies and hypocrisy'. The bishop sees Protestants as the originators of this project, 'but unfortunately everyone else has taken it up, including many supposedly "Orthodox" shepherds'. In view of such stagnation within Serbian Orthodoxy, which today stands in defiant self-imposed isolation, ecumenism must now ask itself self-critically after six years of attempted mediation between the confessions in the Balkan war whether it has ever been worthwhile turning a blind eye to the ideologies of different churches.

Immediately after the Belgrade opposition had made its voice heard 'another

Serbia' requested permission to speak. There must have been a lot of strong feeling for this to happen: at the end of March 1997 340 monks, nuns, abbots with the whole communities of their monasteries and individual priests handed a petition to the leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church protesting against its more than 30-year membership of the WCC. Despite much scepticism about ecumenism not one bishop, it is true, has so far added his signature to the petition, but several have been openly urging its acceptance. The petitioners maintain that the ecumenical movement 'is no longer concerned with the exclusive unity of Christians' but includes 'all non-Christian and pagan religions and sects, even Satanists, among its numbers', which is leading to 'the coronation of the Antichrist and a global superreligion'. The petitioners thus believe that ecumenism has become a great heresy. The protestors even accuse the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople of acting heretically through his contacts with Rome, and their own Patriarch Pavle and Bishop Lavrentije, who has a positive ecumenical record, also come under fire. The petitioners say that the Serbian church leadership has received money from the WCC to build theological seminaries only for heretical western Protestants to lead Orthodox students astray in them. In connection with the petition a catalogue of a whole variety of 'sins' has been circulated listing well-known objections to the western interpretation of ecumenism in order to point out to the Belgrade church leadership that they should withdraw cooperation from 'this secularised satanic organisation, the World Council of "Churches"'. The main attack is being conducted with the help of material including partially understood or inaccurate clichés derived from the New Age movement, criticism of feminist theology and broadsides against the Küng project 'World Religions and a Global Ethic', according to which the name of God is to be replaced by a 'higher reality'.

Bishop Artemije (Radosavljević) and Metropolitan Amfilohije (Radović) are said to be masterminding the revolt with their archconservative and disorientated followers, as well as the abbots of the famous monasteries of Čačak, Žiča, Sopočani and Ravanica in Serbia and Dečani in Kosovo. There is also an archimandrite named Venijamin, who, denying any commission from above, travelled to the Orthodox communities of the diocese of Central Europe (Germany, Switzerland and Austria) and elsewhere publicising the petition in order to get more supporters for it.

At its annual meeting from 23 May to 4 June 1997 the Holy Synod dealt cautiously and indirectly with the demands of the petitioners by acknowledging that 'a crisis has arisen in ecumenical relations between the Orthodox Churches and other Christian Churches'. The declaration continued:

Like other local Orthodox Churches, our Church conforms to the gospel commission by always being ready to participate in dialogue with other sister Churches so that the unity of all Christians may be restored. In this respect the synod will bring the question of relations with the ecumenical movement and continuing membership of the WCC to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other Orthodox Churches in accordance with its ecclesiological and pastoral responsibilities in order that an all-Orthodox discussion might take place in the spirit of the basic Orthodox principles of conciliarity and unity.

### **Well-Aimed Publicity**

Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro took it upon himself to make a unique special appearance. In an interview with the Belgrade newspaper *Vjesti* on 4 June



1997 he readily offered information on the motives of the Orthodox clergy. Beneath the sensational headline 'We don't want to work with demons!' the bishop argued that the World Council of Churches had taken the road to syncretism, equating Christianity with all possible sects and natural religions, even Satanism; an undertaking which was inconceivable to the Serbian Orthodox Church, which could not give its support without betraying itself. The Serbian Orthodox Church was thus seriously considering leaving the WCC. The metropolitan declared:

The Holy Bishops' Assembly is still in session and a definitive decision about withdrawal has not yet been reached, but basically I can say that there is great concern about the state of the WCC as well as its course over recent decades, not just in the Serbian Orthodox Church, but also in the majority of local Orthodox Churches.

For the Orthodox, said the metropolitan, the main factors were that there were communities which had introduced female bishops and pastors, as well as 'member churches which have given their blessing to such unnatural things as marriages between persons of the same sex'; 'the Orthodox Church cannot stay in the WCC alongside demons'. The metropolitan offered salvation through Serbian Orthodoxy, 'which with a pure heart could use all its strength and centuries of experience to overcome the schism in Christianity', but which at the present time 'could not help, even with the best will in the world, as things are drawing ever nearer to catastrophe.' 'The Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Georgian Church have already left,' added the metropolitan prophetically, 'and as far as I can see, the other Orthodox Churches are soon going to be following them.'

At the moment Russia hangs in the balance, having already tried out a revolt but having temporarily aborted it. However, the Serbian appeal notes with relish the fact that when the WCC was founded in 1948 the Russian Orthodox Church turned down an invitation to join it.

We must all ask ourselves how far legitimate preservation of an identity, be it national, religious, or both, should be allowed to proceed: when does it become damaging for another group that is similarly seeking its own identity? As a Croatian source commented on centrifugal trends in the churches, including the disappearance of trust between Catholics and Orthodox, 'This combative, pigheaded self-isolation from other Christian believers is a terrible scandal, a historical sin by the whole of Christendom.' In preparing for Graz the Protestant theologian from Vienna Ulrich Körtner warned against overestimating the role of the churches as peacemakers. He believes that the churches should be the first to have the Biblical mission of reconciliation preached to them precisely because for their own part they are interwoven with the politics and history of their own peoples, and therefore share in their conflicts and inconsistencies. In view of the continuing inability of even the traditional churches to establish their own independent identity I am led to the conclusion that this conflict is unresolvable for the foreseeable future.

## Notes and references

<sup>1</sup> The World Council of Churches (WCC), the Conference of European Churches (CEC), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC).

(Translated from the German by Geraldine Fagan)