Orthodoxy and Education in Post-Socialist Serbia

A Comment

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Abstract

This essay is a comment on Orthodox Christianity and formal education in post-socialist Serbia. It considers the hostility of state socialism towards religion and, using Russian Orthodoxy as an initial point of comparison, examines religion and the State in post-socialist Serbia. This is a neglected theme, given the civil war that destroyed the socialist federation of Yugoslavia. The essay focuses on the aspirations of the Serbian Orthodox Church to recover its former position of moral influence through the teaching of religion in schools. It considers the tensions that this has aroused with a secularist lobby, and suggests that the extent to which Serbia is located within contemporary Europe is key to the outcome of this debate.

Introduction

It is well known that systems of state-socialism were historically based on the ownership and control of the fundamental means of production and the distribution of wealth. The system itself was directed through a bureaucratically determined central plan, devised and implemented by a so-called vanguard communist party, organized on Leninist principles of "democratic centralism." This system, paradoxically, attempted to construct a utopian future, a time of economic abundance and equality, of classless communism, when the state would have "withered away." This aspiration required the hegemony of the socialist system that required that all aspects of social life – legal, cultural, and educational – were brought under the ideological control of the ruling communist party. This necessarily had a profound impact on attitudes towards morality and the education of the conscience. As Morgan notes,

"The purpose of moral education in the conditions of state socialism was instrumental to the goal of promoting social revolution and constructing a socialist society, the means to the final stage of classless communism" (393-94). This necessitated control over all means of developing and communicating values, such as the formal education system and the media of communications. In such circumstances, organized religion was seen as a threat to the ideological hegemony of the ruling communist party that could not be tolerated. The official ideology was atheism, and the practice of religion was discouraged, often brutally.

The state-socialist system has now collapsed, with the notable exceptions of the People's Republic of China and other isolated examples outside of Europe, such as Vietnam, Cuba, and North Korea. The key question is what has subsequently happened, and this can be considered from many perspectives, such as the economy, politics, social change, and identity. In this comment we consider a relatively neglected aspect of the transition, the renewed relationship between religion, specifically Orthodox Christianity, and education in the post-socialist state. We focus on post-socialist Serbia because of the bloody civil and ethnic wars that resulted in the break-up of the federation of Yugoslavia. We present a brief account of the better-known case of post-socialist Russia to give the reader a point of comparison and contrast.

Russian Orthodoxy

In Russia the Orthodox Church sees itself today, as it has always done, as the cornerstone of the identity of the Russian people. There is evidence that the revival of religious belief and identity continues in other former socialist states of the Soviet Union, such as the Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia. The influential book *Seeking God* (Baltaden) argues that such religious identity is rooted firmly in the national traditions of such countries and that there have been continuing attempts by the Orthodox Church to establish itself as the official post-socialist state religion. An example is the status achieved by the Georgian Orthodox Church during the presidency of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. In Russia, as Sabrina Ramet observes, changes in the *practice* of religion helped to prepare changes in *legislation* that granted the Orthodox Church full legal status; religious education has been introduced in schools; property restored; and places of worship re-opened. The Orthodox Church has also been allowed to import books and educational resources to develop and, most importantly, conduct its own charitable activity.

Russian Patriarch Aleksii II identified *educational renewal* among the most important tasks of the Russian state, as the Russians had a great deal of cultural and historical knowledge with which to re-acquaint themselves (Daniel). The Ukrainian Church began its spiritual renewal in central Ukraine in 1989 with a lay movement that aimed to form a national Orthodox Church. This renewal led to the declaration, August 19, 1989, by Father V. Yarema, the pastor of Saint Peter and Saint Paul Church in Lviv, that the church was withdrawing from the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate (Tataryn). Power and nationalism have come to be seen as core generative sources of Orthodox revival along with the need to strengthen the nation and the state in religious terms (Benkovska-Sabkova; Kolner; Komaromi; Ladykowska; Tocheva; and Zigon).

It is claimed that 4,000 new parishes were organized in the former Soviet Union immediately following the end of Communism, nearly 1,600 in Russia and more than 1,700

in the Ukraine (Daniel: 47-59). The *Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations*, passed in 1990, made it legitimate to teach religion to children of all ages. To fulfill these tasks, the Church needed to open new training centers, educate priests, and provide for the population at large. The 1997 *Law* made the Russian Orthodox Church the only organization eligible to receive state aid for the restoration and maintenance of religious objects, important from historical and cultural standpoints (Daniel and Marsh: 30). There is evidence that the Putin regime has been and remains concerned with the problematic nature of Russia's identity, and some argue there is a clear preference for a mono-cultural Russian centrism (Warhola: 127). As we shall see below, Serbia has followed a similar trajectory.

Serbian Orthodoxy

In religious terms there are not many differences between Serbia and Russia. In both countries the relationship between religion and education, as well as speculation on the place of Orthodox culture and of catechism, continue to be the subjects of keen debate (Dačić: 13; Ladykowska: 92-103). After decades of exile and neglect, the Serbian Orthodox Church now aspires to the position it had in the past. It argues that religious education is essential as it enriches the cultural knowledge of the pupils and deepens their awareness of the relations between the Church and State and between religion and society. This newly found optimism, not unexpectedly, has met opposition. In contemporary Serbia secular intellectuals and social movements are, not surprisingly, hostile to the involvement of the Church in community affairs.

Such opposition is countered by the emergence of right-wing political parties. Most notable of these are the Serbian Renewal Movement, the Serbian Radical Party, and the Democratic Party of Serbia. As elsewhere, in Russia and the Ukraine for example, a politically conservative and nationalist ideology has joined hands with the Orthodox faith. The Serbian leader Vojislav Koštunica, the leader of the Democratic Party of Serbia, came to power in 2000, and members of the royal family were allowed to return. It is worth noting that Koštunica paid tribute to the Church and occasionally attended liturgies, which may be compared with the attitude of Putin in Russia. Koštunica also supported improved salaries for the clergy, as well as laws against abortion. Moreover, the introduction of the catechism became a key issue of education policy in Serbia.

The Serbian Orthodox Church and Religious Education

One of the most important elements of Koštunica's political approach has been his support for introducing the catechism in public schools (Perica: 205). However, the main problem was an identity crisis in regard to religious education. For example, sociologist Zorica Kuburić (2009) observes that before communism Serbia had the catechism in schools and there was general belief in the existence of God. However, during communism, catechism in schools was abolished and atheism became the state ideology. This has changed again with the post-socialist transformation and there has been a revival of religious education and, to train educators to provide this, workshops were organized by the Serbian Ministry of Education with the Ministry of Religions. The former is responsible for general education reform, how it is embodied in practice, the optimal national provision of education, the allocation of funds for the purposes of professional education, and scientific

development. The Ministry of Religions is concerned with the co-existence of various faiths and denominations in Serbia and public general religious affairs. It was agreed that those qualified in theology could become religious educators in the public system of schools, joining teachers trained specifically for this purpose (Dačić: 20).

This development may be compared with similar developments in Russia. Ideologically, the goal of religious education in both countries is to acquaint pupils with the Orthodox ontological worldview, which is a specific Christian historical view that claims that the history of the Orthodox Church and Christian eschatology constitute the realm of the ideal (Dačić: 19). It is argued that the Russian Ministry of Education has been inconsistent in its policy towards the introduction of catechism (Glanzer and Petrenko: 82). However, the inclusion in the school curriculum in Russia of "Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture" is seen as an important breakthrough in the context of Russian post-socialism (Daniel and Marsh: 33). More recently, it has been claimed that, as far as teachers are concerned, the current situation is still fluid and that there is competition in building their ". . . legitimacy as competent professionals. Religious higher education obviously plays a crucial role in this process" (Ladykowska: 101). In Serbia the Orthodox Church has preserved its religious identity and furthered its aims for a role in public education. Some Serbian commentators suggest also that the inclusion of the catechism in the curriculum of public education could deepen the understanding of other religions. For instance, Kuburić says that knowledge of other religions and interpreting their teachings and intentions correctly is an imperative for contemporary Serbia. He argues, "People were hostile to other religions and misunderstandings spread as in the game of Chinese whispers" (2009: 194).

Religious Education and the Serbian State

The Serbian Orthodox Church has made clear the kind of state it wants: a state that is comprised of ethnic Serbs who practice their faith, secures the status of the national church as the state religion, and develops an educational curriculum comprised of national historiography and religious education (Perica: 215). This raises obvious questions about who should control religious education in contemporary Serbia. Sociologist Dragoljub Đorđević has put forward an alternative view to that of the Orthodox Church. He argues that religious affairs should be studied by sociologists, economists, historians, anthropologists, as well as by those trained in theology. He also believes that his own discipline, sociology, should have primacy because it is not burdened by questions of religious truth (111). This is obviously a secularist position, unacceptable to the Serbian Orthodox Church.

During the academic year beginning in 2001, religious education witnessed further developments in that pupils were allowed to choose between civic and religious education. Civic education is aimed at the transmission of the knowledge of sociology, law, politics, and even philosophy; it is seen as important for the attainment of a broad intellectual outlook and understanding broader social processes. Serbian society is thus approaching the positions of Bosnia-Herzegovina and of Croatia where Christian religious education was re-introduced in 1991 following the breakdown of Yugoslavia. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Muslim education is also allowed. The most important problem for the introduction of the catechism to public schools in Serbia is, once again, the lack of experienced teachers capable of

delivering it effectively, and the absence of teaching resources such as DVDs, CDs, and books. This is essentially a debate about an agreed syllabus and the role of Orthodox culture in particular.

Religious Education in Serbian Schools and Colleges

The renewal of Orthodox religious education in Serbia has not been without opposition and its teachers are not in a comfortable position. They are influenced by the spirit of their community, political factors, and, of course, the attitude of the Orthodox Church towards their teaching. A number of questions first raised in 2003 (Kuburić 2003: 27) remain unanswered: Is their education complete enough for the task? Should the Church supervise their education and training? Should the Church have a say in the appointment of those responsible for religious education? What should the nature of assessment be? Those who teach also need to be certified as competent, but how can the quality of education and training be assured? Again, should the Church or professionals within the educational system do this? What should be done with the growing number of privately owned and privately funded schools? How can those from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds be included in this process?

Some see religious education as a way to indoctrinate youth. From another perspective, the catechism is seen as akin to a Socratic way for young people to lead an examined life. It has been said that for *Homo Serbicus* the significance of the *agapeistic* moral content of religious education is related to the formation of social solidarity and fellowship that has both individual and collective connotations (Mylonas: 83). For instance, according to the official view of the Serbian Orthodox Church, abandoning one's religion and cultural heritage leads to discord and disunity, promiscuity, and the abuse of alcohol and drugs, as well as to a loss of the sense of community (Momčinović-Popov: 81). Again Serbia may be compared with Russia where, it is argued, the Orthodox Church will play a more important role in the future despite the current low levels of church attendance. As deprivation and the inability to cope with everyday problems increases, the need for religion to sustain individuals and communities morally and spiritually will also grow (Warhola: 40).

Conclusion

Our comments are certainly valid in contemporary Serbia, which is undergoing a severe economic and social crisis and the emergence of an alarming gap between the haves and the have-nots. It is argued that catechism in public schools could take up the role that Marxism, with its ideological view of social order and of politics and economics, once occupied. It is claimed that those who attend religious education courses also go to church more often and adhere to the principles taught by their teachers and associates. However, the effects of the introduction of the catechism and of civil rights education are under-researched; more empirical information is needed if what is happening in Serbia and its effects are to be understood. Many parents (32%) believe that religious education is important because it helps broaden the knowledge of their children and gives them a much needed moral compass. A much smaller percentage (8%) gives similar credit to the teaching of civic education (Maksić). There is also some evidence that the effect of religious education on students is positive. Students choose the subject because they have enquiring minds; it

broadens their awareness of the world, and its religious perspective helps them become more conscious in their own spiritual and moral choices. However, as in Russia, the documents and teaching materials used for religious education are considered inappropriate and have major flaws (Kuburić 2003: 122).

In general, many of Serbia's educators and much of the general public believe that the continued development of religious education would be a big step towards countering moral failure in contemporary Serbian society. It is argued that religious education and the introduction of the catechism are crucial to the maintenance of Serbian identity and to providing a basis for comparison with world religions in a context of post-socialism and globalization. However, westernized, secular, and liberal intellectuals remain opposed to the introduction of the catechism and to any revival of Orthodox Church influence. These are familiar tensions in late modern European societies, but in Serbia they are aggravated by recent experience. Current tensions reflect not only the long period of state socialism under Tito and his successors, but also the bitter war over culture and national identity, in which religious belief and affiliation played a dominant part. The key to the future probably lies in the extent to which Serbia can locate itself within contemporary Europe and its prevailing mores.

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