

The Public Defense of the Doctoral Thesis in History

by

Maria Falina

on

**Pyrrhic Victory: East Orthodox Christianity, Politics,
and Serbian Nationalism in the Interwar Period**

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Dissertation abstract

Pyrrhic Victory: East Orthodox Christianity, Politics, and Serbian Nationalism in the Interwar Period

The dissertation analyzes the position and political agenda of the Serbian Orthodox Church in interwar Yugoslavia. The primary aim of the project is to demonstrate how the fusion and the idea of fusion between Serbian nationalism and East Orthodox Christianity were forged and evolved in the interwar period. The dissertation, thus, problematizes the bond between religious and national identities, which seems to be taken for granted in the academia and by the general public. The temporal focus is on the two interwar decades, as it was precisely in this period that the formulation and justification of the blurring of religious and national identities gained most strength. The work aims at describing the Serbian phenomena in a manner that makes it comprehensible and comparable to other European cases, in the region and beyond. Along these lines, the concept ‘Political Orthodoxy’ initially coined for the Romanian context is applied creatively to the Serbian case.

The thesis argues that the context of the interwar Yugoslav and broadly speaking European political life was of great significance for the development of the Serbian Orthodox political project. The examination of Church narratives and discourses has demonstrated that there were several issues that the Church was concerned with the most. They can be summarized in a following way: the church-state relationship; secularization; communism, fascism, liberalism and other modern political ideologies; and finally the national question and nationalism. The reflection on these topics and their different

combinations form the main contents of political thought of the Serbian clergy and religious thinkers. All problems listed above belong to what may be labeled 'political modernity'. I have argued that the Orthodox political project was a result of the Church's attempts to cope with the challenges posed by it. Serbian religious thinkers were busy denying and rejecting certain parts of modernity; most of them, certainly, did not like what they saw. Nevertheless, by engaging with modernity, the Serbian Church often unconsciously and almost always unwillingly entered into modernity and became part of it. Even the most anti-modernist, anti-democratic and anti-Western views of the Serbian Orthodox clerics are an inherent part of European twentieth century modernity.

The dissertation traced how the Orthodox Church, its best minds and rank-and-file members, related to the world around and how their attitude changed and transformed together with it. In 1918 the Serbian Church embraced and supported the new multinational Yugoslav state; in March 1941 the Patriarch and some important hierarchs supported the coup which eventually led to the dissolution of the state. The task was thus to see what kind of impulses and decisions taken during the interwar decades led to this dramatic change. Naturally, the final outcome was to a considerable extent defined by the challenges, through the interaction between the Serbian Church and other actors. One of the main themes, that in a way organized the entire narrative of this dissertation, was the question of the balance between the internal intellectual development in the Serbian Orthodox Church and surrounding milieus on the one hand, and the "external" influences of the immediate political context, other religious communities, etc., on the other

The end of WWI meant a thorough transformation of the European political context, and the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was just one of the outcomes. The Serbian elite, and the Serbian clergy who conceived of itself as an important part of the national elite, suddenly had to operate in a new multinational and religiously heterogeneous state. Given the complexity of the new political constellation and a degree of the initial post-war chaos, it is not very surprising that up until the mid-1920s the Serbian Church was not very actively involved in the national politics. The aims of the Church more or less coincided with those of the newly born state, or at least this is what both parties believed at the time. Both were excited about the new state and supported and promoted the idea of the 'liberation and unification' despite its obvious discrepancy with the reality.

The decade from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s was the time of the 'work behind the scene', a time of debates within the Church. Thus, the second radical change in the political context that came with the introduction of the Royal Dictatorship in 1929 occurred while the Serbian Orthodox clergy were in the process of setting an agenda for themselves. The new system of governance meant that suddenly the churches and religious symbols became even more laden with political significance, as they constituted one of the few ways to assert national identity, different from the integral Yugoslav one. In the circumstances of a vacuum of national rhetoric, the appeal to the national feelings was an effective strategy. Moreover, it felt familiar to the Church to emphasize the national aspect of East Orthodox Christianity. This combination of factors led to a gradual marginalization and rejection of those streams within the Church that did not accentuate the national dimension. The original

idea of evangelical and social work of *bogomoljci* was increasingly more often replaced by national and nationalist rhetoric of Nikolaj Velimirović. The initiatives of the ecumenical dialogue transformed into regional cooperation of the Orthodox churches against secularism, liberalism and communism. Weak attempts to include the values of the political left did not develop into anything significant.

The period from the mid-1930s to the break up of the country in 1941 was characterized by the escalation of tensions between the federalists, mostly Croatian, and the central government in Belgrade. Against the background of a political conflict, which took on more and more the form of a Serbo-Croatian conflict, the renewed strategy of the Serbian Church, put together in the previous decade, contributed to cementing the association of the Church and East Christianity with Serbian nationalism and Serbian national interests. In the latter part of the 1930s a phenomenon referred to here as *Political Orthodoxy* took form. It signifies the new type and level of political involvement of the Serbian Church. The primary difference with the preceding period was the formulation of a number of theoretical justifications for both, open political participation, and association with the national cause of the Church. The Serbian Church (following the path and drawing upon the experiences of other European Churches) put together its own response to political Modernity.

It is important to underline, that there is a fundamental difference between having a national narrative, which the Serbian Church (like many other churches) had since the nineteenth century, and having an elaborated theological and conceptual understanding of

nation as a modern social and political phenomenon. The latter was generally speaking missing from the Serbian religious scene up until the late-1930s.

In 1941 the Serbian Church sided with the Serbian national cause and against the state. This was a logical result of the developments of the preceding twenty years. It may seem counter intuitive, though, if one interprets the history of the East Orthodox Christianity in the twentieth century through the lenses of the medieval dogmatic teaching. *Symphonia*, the symbiotic relationship between ecclesiastical and secular authorities, is strongly associated with Orthodoxy even today. One of the keys to the comprehension of the Serbian paradoxical (in a sense) case lies in the analysis of how ‘Church’ was understood by the Serbian religious thinkers. I argue that it is less about *Symphonia* and the Byzantine tradition of the balance of power and the church-state relationship, and more about the conceptualization of community. This is why *sobornost* and *Church* are such important concepts. Orthodox political theories in the region engaged in the discussion of community and were focused on the nation as a community, on the one hand, and on the issue of communal piety and spirituality (as in the religious movements mentioned above), on the other. The use of *sobornost* by the Serbian religious thinkers that served as an important justification of the bond between religious and national communities was only one of the possibilities. Alternative understandings of ‘church’ and its role in society, intellectually present but not commonly accepted, could have led to very different political results.

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Areas of Research Interest:

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2005 CEU Budapest, Hungary

MA (with distinction) in Central European History

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- “Svetosavlje: A case-study in the Nationalization of Religion”, in *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte* 101 (2007), 505-527
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- “Nikola Pašić, Sloga Srbo-Hrvata”, in *Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe ,1770-1945: texts and commentaries. Vol. IV Anti-Modernism: Radical Revisions of Collective Identity*. (Budapest, CEU Press, forthcoming in 2012)

Conferences and Workshops:

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