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MY ORTHODOX NEIGHBOUR*

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APSTRAKT: Autor na razumljiv i pristupačan način postavlja i odgovara na četiri pitanja povodom ističnog hrišćanstva: Šta je to pravoslavac? Pravoslavlje u svetu: perspektiva? Šta poštuje i kakav je vernik moj komšija pravoslavac? Moj komšija pravoslavni Srbin? Autorova namera je da približi pravoslavlje i pravoslavnu kulturu čitaocima koji imaju veoma malo informacija o istočnom hrišćanstvu.

Ključne riječi: pravoslavlje, pravoslavne crkve, srpsko pravoslavlje, pravoslavni vernik, pravoslavni običaji.

ABSTRACT: The author poses and answers four questions concerning Eastern Christianity in a comprehensible and accessible manner: What is Orthodoxy? Orthodoxy in the world: prospects? What does my Orthodox neighbour worship and what kind of a believer is he/she? My neighbour Orthodox Serb? The author's intention is to bring Orthodoxy and the Orthodox culture closer to the readers who have very few information on Eastern Christianity.

Key words: Orthodoxy, Orthodox churches, Serbian Orthodoxy, Orthodox believer, Orthodox customs.

What is Orthodoxy?

Every *Christian* should know that their religion, as the largest one in the world, split over time into three equal branches or denominations: in the 11th century into *Orthodoxy* and *Catholicism*, while in the 16th century a third confession was formed by separation from the Roman Catholic Church – *Protestantism*. Today, all Christians and all Christian communities only agree upon the fact that they all „believe in Jesus Christ as their founder and their idol“.

Orthodox Christians and Catholics differ in both their teachings and organisation. These are not such great differences, the ones that could not be overcome in the future in order to once again establish the unity. The split started, the Orthodox claim, when Catholics in the West started teaching how the Holy Spirit emanated, stemmed not only from God the Father, but also from God the Son, Jesus Christ (*filioque*). On the other hand, the Eastern, Orthodox Church has kept the apostles' teaching: only God the Father emanates, or to simplify – sends the Holy Spirit into the world. Contrary to Catholicism,

* Prepared as a part of the project *Sustainability of the Identity of Serbs and National Minorities in the Border Municipalities of Eastern and Southeastern Serbia* (179013), conducted at the University of Niš – Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, and supported by the Ministry of Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

Orthodoxy rejects the existence of Purgatory, but accepts that Mother of God, who conceived Jesus immaculately, was subject to the ancestral sin as well. Orthodoxy also denies the *Papal primacy* and his *infallibility*, a dogma introduced in the 19th century.

Orthodoxy – proper thinking, proper believing in Christian religion, appreciation of the traditions of religion, the congregation of all Orthodox Christians – in which the process of branching took place over centuries, is currently represented by 15 *autocephalous* (independent) local churches in: Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Russia, Cyprus, Georgia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Poland, Czech Republic/Slovakia, Albania, and America; with two *autonomous* ones – Finnish and Japanese Church. And this will not be the end of it, since new churches will continue to appear in the Orthodox world due to the incorrect interpretation that every nation must have its own independent church. Thus, the Macedonian Orthodox and Montenegrin Orthodox Churches want to separate themselves from the Serbian Orthodox Church, while no less than two Ukrainian Orthodox Churches want to become independent of the Russian Church. However, wishes are one thing, and the following of Orthodox Canons, i.e. the regulations that can grant independency, another: sometimes the process can last for a hundred years. Therefore, none of the abovementioned Churches have recognised either the Macedonian, Montenegrin, or Ukrainian Churches.

In the organisational sense, Orthodoxy, as Protestantism, *has no general centre of government*; the Ecumenical (ecumenical = belonging to the whole inhabited world) Patriarch, whose seat is in Istanbul (formerly Constantinople), enjoys respect and the position of the „first among equals“, but not legal or any other form of authority over other churches. The other 14 autocephalous churches are absolutely independent and episcopally governed with a patriarch or an archbishop at the helm (Ђорђевић, 1991).

All Orthodox churches have the same *religious teaching* and *cult*. They were formulated during the first seven *Ecumenical Councils* – the last one was held in the 8th century – which are the only ones that the Eastern Church acknowledges. Since 1960 the next all-Orthodox Council has been carefully prepared for the purpose of coordinating Orthodoxy with the modern age. The sources of *Orthodox teaching* are the *Holy Scripture* and the *Sacred Tradition*. The Bible and personal interpretation by believers are not sufficient, as is the case in Protestantism, but the criterion of tradition is also necessary. Finnish Archbishop Paul (1984: 20) says: „Without such a benchmark, the authority of the Bible would be reduced to the personal opinion of each individual trying to interpret it. We believe that the Bible itself, without the tradition, as its living interpreter, is not sufficient as the source of the truth.“ The sacred tradition has been established by ecumenical and local councils, deeds of the church fathers, and ancient service of worship.

The *Orthodox Cult* is rich and diverse – from the seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation, penance, Eucharist, matrimony, ordination, and anointing of

the sick), over prayer, iconolatry, worship of the cross, relics, remains, and holy places, to the cult of saints, fasting, and celebrating great holidays.

Orthodoxy in the world: prospects

Orthodoxy, *the second largest* Christian denomination, right behind Roman Catholicism, encompasses 5.65% of the world population at the beginning of the 21st century, which amounts to 300 million Orthodox believers. It is traditionally spread across the Balkans – among Serbs, Greeks, Montenegrins, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Romanians, and, which many are not aware of, part of Albanians (25%). In eastern Europe it is mostly found in eastern Slavic peoples – Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians. Apart from Russians, Orthodoxy is present in various other peoples which live in the Russian Federation.

The countries with the predominant Orthodox population comprise: *Serbia* (84%), *Montenegro* (74%), *Macedonia* (65%), *Greece* (95%), *Bulgaria* (83%), *Romania* (87%), *Russia* (80%), *Belarus* (85%), *Ukraine* (80%), *Georgia* (89%), *Moldova* (98%), *Cyprus* (80%). Orthodoxy is to a higher extent also present in *Bosnia and Herzegovina* (36%) and *Kazakhstan* (40%). Furthermore, it can be found in *Estonia* (13%), *Latvia* (9%), *Lithuania* (4%). Smaller groups of Orthodox believers live in *Poland*, *Czech Republic*, *Slovakia*, *Hungary*, *Turkey*, and *Azerbaijan*.

As far as *Nordic countries* are concerned, sources show that there is a statistically significant spreading of the Orthodox only in Finland (1.2%) and Sweden (1%), while there are a few parishes in other countries (Miz, 2002).

Also called Orthodox are the ancient eastern churches, that preach the dogmata only from the first three Ecumenical Councils, and out of which the best-known are the Armenian, Ethiopian, and Coptic (Egyptian) Church.

The largest Orthodox Church is the Russian Church, and it has around 150 million believers, with its seat in Moscow, because of which it is called the „Third Rome“ by the Orthodox – the first is the Rome itself with the Vatican, while Constantinople, Tsarigrad, i.e. today's Istanbul, is considered the „Second Rome“ as an ancient seat of the Ecumenical Patriarch and, so to speak, the centre of Orthodoxy. There are hidden and open conflicts between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Constantinople (the Ecumenical Patriarchate), in whose background lie the battle for primacy, for priority in the Orthodox world. The strongest church with the most numerous body of believers – especially in relation to the Church of Constantinople which has a negligible congregation, but a centuries old Canonical and spiritual tradition – would like to lead the way, to be listened to, and be the most respected one.

Truth be told, Orthodoxy spread outside of the region where it originated, particularly in the 19th, the 20th, and at the beginning of the 21st century. Contrary to various expectations, the *prospects* of Orthodoxy are more than bright.

1. Due to the collapse of the communist and atheist ideology, a social, cultural, and spiritual climate for the renewal, and even blooming of Orthodoxy

is created. In Europe and America religious stimuli are *no longer coming from the West to the East*, but vice versa. It is evident that Orthodoxy has remained the most vital spiritual force in the region that traditionally belongs to it, even though it has been subjected to harsh repression and nipped in the bud.

2. Orthodoxy will offer the world a connection with history, since it is itself an agent of world history, as summarised by Serbian Patriarch German (1990: 21): „Its beauty, humanity, culture, and art were primarily spread by Byzantium and Russia. The October Revolution (1917) caused immense injustice to Orthodoxy, yet also did it a favour, unwillingly, by spreading it from the East to the West... That is why there are Orthodox eparchies and parishes in Japan, Africa, America, and Australia. Orthodoxy is an unbroken heritage of the Evangelical Apostolic Church of Christ in the East, but today also in the West.“ *Orthodoxy travels* – without being spectacular, *slowly but surely, toward the West*, trying to put the testimony of historical vertical into the historical horizontal.

3. Orthodox Christian faith will still offer love and peace, happiness and tolerance to millions of people, enabling them to find the meaning and reason to live, and providing a sense of balance and perseverance. It can achieve this if it is not reduced merely to the Christianity of laws and customs, a mass religiosity of the external type, but to the permanent „*freeing of the inner man in Orthodox spirituality*“.

If this be the case, it is too much to hope that the entire inhabited world will be Orthodox Christian.

What does my Orthodox neighbour worship and what kind of a believer is he/she?

The essence of Orthodox piety is most concisely expressed in the *Symbol of Faith*, which was presented to the holy fathers at the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381).

All Orthodox churches insist on the so-called classical, *church believer*, who should adopt all Orthodox teachings – believe in God/Holy Trinity (the unity of God the Father, God the Son Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit), Virgin Mary, afterlife, heaven, hell... – adequately perform the rites and regularly visit the temple: celebrate holidays, go to the church, on Sundays for liturgy, pray every day, fast, and take communion. There is no desired Orthodox believer without churchliness.

Let us be honest, it is a thin layer of our Orthodox neighbours who do all these things. All of them say that they are of Orthodox confession, *they are simple-hearted in their religiosity*, they generally claim that they believe in God, fear Him and cross themselves, but only few of them, for example, believe in heaven and hell – they are far less theologically educated than Catholics and Protestants – they rarely go to the church, let alone every Sunday for liturgy, and even more rarely take communion and, by God, they do not fast.

However, let us remind ourselves, Orthodoxy is a ritualistic confession and the majority of the Orthodox are traditional practitioners, they celebrate the so-called great holidays, use the institutional church services during the crucial moments in their lives, are not well versed in the religious teaching, and are declaratively religious. In the example of Serbs and Montenegrins, the most prominent are traditional believers. It is the case of *a traditional, ritual type who is baptised (and baptises its own offspring), married in the church, celebrates its saint's day (probably also Christmas and Easter, and especially religious processions in villages), and will be buried with a memorial service*. I introduce the name of „four rites believer“ for such a believer, assured that they are the most prevalent ones, and I reverse Grace Davie's rule of „believing without belonging“ – which is true for Christians in Western Europe – into the formulation „traditional belonging without believing“. *At the beginning of the 21st century, the Orthodox are religious in a manner of traditional belonging without believing* (Đorđević, 2009a:64).

Orthodoxy is essentially traditionalistic and it nurtures the family order and peace. In line with the principle that „Jesus Christ is in heaven, an emperor in a state, and a host in a house“, it demands respect for the elders – the oldest member is the „host“, the head of the family – grandfathers and grandmothers, parents, but also children. A family or ceremonial meal should not begin without the host seated at the table, for example, the grandfather and his grandson usually take the bread made specially for the saint's day to the church to get it sanctified.

There are remains of ancient forms of believing in Orthodox believers and superstitions, magical and occult phenomena are not completely uprooted. *Superstitions* are most widespread in the Orthodox, followed by Protestants, and finally Catholics. (On the whole, superstition is more widespread in Muslims than in Christians.) Thus, do not be surprised when your Orthodox female neighbour, in the instance of a grave illness or serious trouble, does not ask a doctor or a priest for help, but visits a simple fortune teller or an old lady in the neighbouring village who „conjures magic“. Similar to this, if a daughter is still not wed or a son still not married, a lot of Orthodox believers will interpret this as a case of „cast magic spells“ – by a neighbour, a cousin, or some other hater from the neighbourhood – on the household and the family. Even today, when a student is taking an exam and exiting the house, the mother will spill a wash-bowl or a jug of water on the steps behind him or her.

It should be emphasised that, due to the abovementioned, Orthodoxy and Orthodox believers *yielded* to the rush of atheism in the former socialist societies, while Catholicism and Islam did not (Јевтић, 2009). Learned people say that the causes of mass unreligiosity of the Orthodox population lie in the Orthodoxy itself and its churches. Orthodoxy has still not experienced the „inner protestantisation“, nor has it contributed to the shaping of a modern and stable civil consciousness. This is particularly the case in the predominantly rural Orthodox population that is still not ready for the modern democratic

society, critical public opinion, and market competition. If this had not been so, which the readers from the former Yugoslavia are well aware of, the following would not have been possible: the commissary has spoken – thus there is no God.

In any way, the Orthodox Christianity is often referred to as „sweet“: it does not ask for much, nor does it press many demands, it is not strict – since it is not a religion of laws, yet it offers a lot. That is why it is so attractive.

My neighbour Orthodox Serb

Yes, the majority of Serbs that we encounter, and that are our closest neighbours, are Orthodox and they belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). However, this has not always been the case, nor it is today. Not that long ago, there were a lot of Catholic and Muslim Serbs, thus it was possible for Vuk Karadžić to write about „Serbs of three laws“ – the Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim. Today it is different, there are negligible numbers of other confessions, partially due to historical events, because of which we are now in Scandinavia, and not in our homeland, and partially due to the position of the *SOC to recognise as Serbs only those of Orthodox denomination*. The bishop, and now also a saint, Nikolaj Velimirović – himself a long time member of the Diaspora – passed a harsh judgment that „a Serb without faith is like a famous firm on an empty shop“, where he was joined by a renowned priest, Ljubomir Ranković: „Serbness without faith is form without essence.“ Catholic, Muslim, Protestant Serbs... are not good Serbs.

Yet, the life goes on and we are not surprised when, here in Norway or Sweden, or over there in Bosnia and Serbia, we get a Serb for a neighbour who does not go to the SOC, but to a church of Adventists, Baptists, Pentecostals, or Jehovah's Witnesses. Sociologists of religion claim that almost one percent of Serbs have left the SOC and embraced some of the small religious communities of the *newly Protestant* origin.

Culture tells us to meet the Orthodox neighbour and his or her customs and behaviour. As soon as we enter the home of an Orthodox Serb, we should encounter an *icon* in a visible, central position, a picture of the saint – a family one – and a sanctuary lamp beneath it. On the table, or a TV stand, there is no *Bible* in a leather cover as one can find in an Adventist home, because, as already mentioned above, reading religious literature is not a strong side of Orthodox believers.

However, Orthodox Serbs will prepare during the entire year, even if they are poor, to celebrate their *saint's day* richly, often for a couple of days („Ivkova slava“): Saint Parascheva, Saint Michael the Archangel, Saint Nicholas (the most widespread saint's day), Saint John, Saint Sava... Neighbours will entertain up to several tens of cousins, friends from work, and neighbours for their saint's day. Newly composed Serbs, who do not care much for tradition, but want to show off, celebrate their saint's days in taverns and hotels, which is

an unheard-of blasphemy. And there they will eat and eat, drink and drink until they drop.

An Orthodox Serb will certainly celebrate in a rich fashion, maybe even excessively, first the *birth of a child*, then its baptism in the Church – which is performed right after the birth, and not upon entering boyhood/girlhood as is the case with the new Protestants – and finally the first birthday. No one can take count of nor will even try to sum up the hard-earned money being spent by various people.

And let us not even start on the binges that Serbian weddings turn into after the civil and *church wedding ceremony* between sons and daughters-in-law – almost all brides and grooms today enter into marriage in the Church, and they are charged handsomely by the priests! Your Orthodox neighbour, if the wedding is held in the homeland, will usually have from, at least, 100 to the maximum of 200 guests. And what about the cost of the ceremony itself and renting special venues for weddings and celebrations.

Trust your Orthodox neighbour – unfortunately you will become convinced, since people inevitably leave the life on Earth – that the pre-mortal, mortal, and post-mortal customs demand a lot from oneself. And then, concerning the memorial service, a „mound“ of food needs to be prepared along with a lot of alcohol, since everyone present is obliged to have lunch after the *funeral* of the deceased. And there have to be three seatings, or as it has been called from the olden days – there have to be three sofras. It is the time of drinking and eating as if it were a celebration of sorts, and not the saddest day in one's life. This custom has been distorted to such an extent that an Orthodox Serb needs to rent a tavern. Thus, in Niš, next to the city cemetery, a special tavern for such occasions has been opened. What is it called? What else than *Parastos*.¹ One should witness the Orthodox All Souls' Days, three times a year, at a village cemetery somewhere!

Do not worry much about your Orthodox neighbours, they like to celebrate both church and secular holidays, not thinking about saving money or calculating in advance, they are happy, like to enjoy themselves and, which is the most important thing, *they like to entertain other people*, especially their neighbours, convinced that God will look upon them from time to time.

That is why, without hesitation, and even without an invitation, you can step over their threshold and *together* share the happiness and sorrow upon the birth of an offspring and baptism, wedding and saint's day, funeral and meal for the dead... Respect those three or four rites in their annual and life cycle, and you will have a good friend, neighbour, and countryman. It is not much, is it?!

¹ The word *parastos* is of Greek origin, meaning *requiem*.

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