

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE AND THE CHURCH OF SERBIA DURING THE PERIOD 1885-1912

The Episcopal Question in Old Serbia and Northern Macedonia

The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople had granted, as it is known autonomy¹ to the Serbian Church in 1831 and independence² (autocephalous status) in 1879 in accordance with the canonical principle of the Orthodox Church which states that the ecclesiastical order is directly affected by the political and public one.³ In 1830 an autonomous Serbian principality was founded which became independent in 1879.

This canonical principle was observed by both the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Orthodox Churches in all the countries or parts of them emancipated from the Turkish empire, with the exception of the Church of Bulgaria which declared itself independent, through the Bulgarian Exarchate, before the founding of the Bulgarian State. This act was uncanonical and had as a sad result the declaration of the Bulgarian Church as schismatic (1872), though it had been politically recognized by a Sultan's firman (decree) on February 27, 1870.

The administrative and spiritual ties between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Serbian Church between 1831 and 1879 were excellent. Shortly afterwards, however, they experienced difficulties due to the attempt of the Exarchate to Bulgarize the parts of Old Serbia and Northern Macedonia still unredeemed, where, in addition to the Greek and Bulgarian communities there were Serbian ones as well, as our sources will show below. The Serbian Church

1. Synodic volume regulating the election of the bishops in Serbia. See Delikanis K., Πατριαρχικῶν ἐγγράφων τόμος τρίτος (Patriarchal Documents vol. 3), Constantinople, 1905, pp.746-749.

2. *Nezavisnost Srpske Crkve proglašena 1897 god.* (The acquisition of autocephalous status by the Serbian Church in 1879), Belgrade 1880. This work contains all the necessary documents and the Acta.

3. Canon 17 of the IVth Ecumenical Council and Canon 31 of the IVth Ecumenical Council.

did not foresee the threat posed against itself by the Bulgarian Exarchate when it sided with the latter in its dispute with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. When the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople sought the opinion of the archbishop of Belgrade in 1869-1870 about the solution of the Bulgarian question, the archbishop suggested the granting of autonomy to the Bulgarian Exarchate.⁴

But the recognition of the Bulgarian Exarchate by Serbia was destined to bring about the greater solidity of the former, and, as far as the Serbs were concerned, the gradual annexation of the greater part of the Serbian element of Old Serbia and Northern Macedonia to the Bulgarian Exarchate (about two thirds of them), while the rest (about one third) remained faithful to the Ecumenical Patriarchate.⁵

The bulgarization of the Serbian population by the Bulgarian Exarchate, through peaceful and violent means, enforced mainly after the Serbian-Turkish war of 1876-1877, reached dangerous limits after 1897 bringing the two nations into a sharp conflict.⁶ Serbia, having realized the impending danger of permanently losing the remaining Serbian elements in Old Serbia and Northern Macedonia, began to take a series of diplomatic and ecclesiastical measures to safeguard her rights in those areas.

Diplomatic Steps. Through the Serbian diplomatic initiative in Constantinople, a plan was submitted to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1885 asking for the appointment of Serbian bishops to the dioceses of Prizren, Skoplje, Dibar, Veles, Bitol and Achrida. In 1887 Serbian consulates were founded in Skoplje, Bitol, Pristina and Thessaloniki, which undertook to direct the Serbian propaganda all over Old Serbia and Northern Macedonia. In 1890 the Serbian diplomats Stojan Novaković and Vladan Djordjević in Constantinople and Athens respectively, received instructions from Belgrade to negotiate on the subject of determining spheres of influence. Following that, the episcopal question of Old Serbia and Northern Macedonia, that is, the ap-

4. *Pravoslavlje* (Orthodoxy) 1871, pp.137-138 and 235-263, where the two letters of the Archbishop of All Serbia to the Ecumenical Patriarch dated May 10, 1869 and Dec. 14, 1870 respectively are published. See also Dučić, N., *Vaseljenska Patrijaršija i Srpsko Crkveno Pitanje* (The Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Serb ecclesiastical question), Belgrade 1897, p.6. Slijepčević Dj., *Istorija Srpske Pravoslavne Crkve*, vol. 2 (The History of the Serbian Orthodox Church), München 1966, pp.471-475.

5. Kostadin, *Carigradska Patrijaršija i pravoslavlje u Evropskoj Turskoj* (The Ecumenical Patriarchate and Orthodoxy in European Turkey), Belgrade 1889, p.37.

6. Potkozarac J., *Srbi u prošlosti*, vol. 2 (The Serbs in the Past), Belgrade 1969, pp. 15-18. See also Slijepčević, pp. 474-481.

pointment of Serbian bishops or metropolitans to the above areas, was officially brought up again during the official visit to Constantinople of the Serbian king Alexander Obrenović in June of 1894.⁷

Ecclesiastical Steps. Metropolitan Michael of Belgrade in his correspondence with the Ecumenical Patriarchs Dionysios V, Neophytos VIII, Anthimos VII and Constantine V, explained the need of appointing Serbian bishops to the dioceses in Old Serbia and Macedonia, which were to remain henceforth under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. In his last letter to Patriarch Anthimos VII, dated November 26, 1896, the metropolitan of Belgrade clearly asked for the appointment of a Serbian bishop to the see of Skoplje. The Ecumenical Patriarch Constantine V, who had meanwhile succeeded Anthimos VII, took this letter to mean an interference in a foreign ecclesiastical jurisdiction and sent a sharp reply.⁸

Following this, Belgrade toyed for a while with the idea of reacting against the Ecumenical Patriarchate by the creation of an Exarchate of Old Serbia and Macedonia modeled on the familiar precedent of the Bulgarian Exarchate. Through the Belgrade daily and periodical press a sharp criticism was levied, resulting in the abandonment of the exarchate idea. It was considered incompatible with the national interest because its adoption would have split the Serbian ecclesiastical administration and would have caused a schism in the relations between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Serbian Church. Finally, the principle of recognizing Serbian schools and electing Serbian metropolitans and bishops in Old Serbia (Raskoprizen, Skoplje) and Northern Macedonia (Dibar, Veles, Achrida and Bitol) was adopted through the activities of the organized Serbian diplomacy in Constantinople and elsewhere as well as the equally well organized ecclesiastical and educational propaganda.⁹ The activities stated above would have aimed at strengthening and protecting the Serb communities.

Another more important fact should be mentioned here. Before the Serbs of free Serbia could wake up to the realization that they should do more about the Serbian schools in the Serbian communities of Old Serbia and Northern Macedonia, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, through its local dioceses, encouraged the education of Serbian teachers and the operation of Serbian schools which it brought under its protection. Thus, under orders by the Ecumenical Patriar-

7. Slijepčević, Dj., *op. cit.* pp.482-485.

8. Dučić, N., *op. cit.*, pp.3-24. This work has been written because of the sharp reply of Patriarch Constantine V.

9. *Ibid.*, pp.35-37.

chate, dated June 13, 1891, the beginning of the school year 1891-1892, Serbian schools were set up in many villages in the Veles area (Kaza).¹⁰ The best organized school of this kind was that of the village Pasakioi. However, about a month after the beginning of classes, based on a school program approved by the diocese, the local Turkish authorities at Veles, "prompted by the schismatic Bulgars," ordered the school closed. This was a violation of the Vizier's encyclical of January 22, 1891, which stated that school matters should be resolved by the Church alone.¹¹

The Diocese protested vehemently, as is shown by the correspondence with the Central Administration and the Diocese of Thessaloniki. The efforts to free the schools of the Serbian communities in the Veles province continued until 1895¹² when the Serbian propaganda turned the Serbian communities against their legitimate ecclesiastical leadership.

Unfortunately, the Greek and Serbian sources pertaining to this have not been published yet and we are thus unable to draw a clear picture of the Serbian activities in the areas under our investigation. However, we will endeavor to present certain data on the prevailing situation in the area under the jurisdiction of the Serbian Consulate in Skoplje and especially the section Dibar-Veles-Kirčevo. These are based on certain unpublished documents which we have found recently in the archives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and much more in those of the Diocese of Thessaloniki. These papers are the reports of Metropolitan Parthenios of Dibar and Veles to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Diocese of Thessaloniki and other persons for 1907-1908 and refer to the activities of the Serbs in his province.

The reports of Metropolitan Parthenios clearly speak about the existence of a Belgrade-financed Serbian propaganda in his province.¹³ Its leader was Jovan Ćirković, the superintendent of the Serbian schools in the province of Dibar and Veles. He organized various demonstrations against the metropolitan and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, aiming at replacing the Greek metropolitan by a Serb. At his suggestion, the Serbian clergymen of the province ceased recognizing the legitimate ecclesiastical authority and commemorating the name of the legitimate metropolitan during the Divine Liturgy.¹⁴ One of them, taking up residence in Kirčevo, the see of the diocese, claimed to be

10. *Archives of the Diocese of Thessaloniki*, file 60, documents 1078, 1079, 1088.

11. *Ibid.*, file 60, documents 1077, 1079, 1082.

12. *Ibid.*, file 60, document 1087, 1088, 1104.

13. *Ibid.*, file 60, document 1121.

14. *Ibid.*, file 60, document 1123.

the trustee of the Serbian clergymen.¹⁵ Their basic demand was the removal of the Greek metropolitan and the appointment of a Serbian one, and the ceding of the Orthodox Church of the Greek community of Kirčevo to the small Serbian community,¹⁶ which, until that time, worshipped peacefully in the same church with the Greek community.

The protests of the metropolitan of Dibar to the local Turkish authorities were fruitless in as much as the latter were bribed by the Serbian propaganda apparatus.¹⁷ He then suggested to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Diocese of Thessaloniki the following measures: (a) the immediate removal of Jovan Ćirković who had been the main instigator of the quarrel between the diocese and the Serbian community,¹⁸ (b) the granting of a permit to the Serbs to build their own church instead of claiming that of another community;¹⁹ (c) the mediation on the part of the Serbian ambassador in Constantinople to counsel the Serbs to submit to the legitimate ecclesiastical authorities and to cooperate with them for their own interest;²⁰ and (d) to take the matter up with the Turkish Government so as to order the local authorities in Kirčevo to suppress the illegal activities of the Serbian propaganda apparatus.²¹ If all the aforesaid measures were to be unsuccessful, then the Serbs should be declared schismatic as the followers of the Bulgarian Exarchate had been before.²²

The Ecumenical Patriarchate in turn was pressed by Serbian diplomacy, but at the same time, it could not ignore the acts of disobedience by the Serbian community of Kirčevo as reported by the metropolitan of Dibar and Veles. It recommended a reconciliation between the diocese and the three Serbian priests in November of 1907. The metropolitan, complying with the Patriarchal order, unsuccessfully called the Serbian priests over to reach a rapprochement. These priests had ceased all contacts with the metropolitan, under instructions and pressure put on them by Ćirković.²³

Following that, it was suggested to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, probably by the Serbian ambassador in Constantinople, to appoint an episcopal

15. *Ibid.*, file 60, document 1121.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, file 60, documents 1120, 1125.

20. *Ibid.*, file 60, documents 1124, 1125.

21. *Ibid.*, document 1125.

22. *Ibid.*, file 60, document 1121.

23. *Ibid.*, file 60, document 1125.

trustee to the Dibar area, that is a chorepiscopus, speaking both Greek and Serbian. In February, 1908, the Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim sought out the opinion of the metropolitan of Dibar and Veles on this recommendation.²⁴ Initially the bishop opposed the suggested solution but being hard pressed economically and almost totally isolated by the Serbian element, was forced to comply. In two of his letters written since October, 1908, which we have recently edited,²⁵ he seems to have finally accepted the appointment of the Serb chorepiscopus in the Dibar area. A few months later, the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate appointed the Greek-speaking Serbian Archimandrite Varnavas Rosić as chorepiscopus of the Dibar area under the metropolitan of Dibar and Veles. Archimandrite Varnavas was later to become metropolitan of Skoplje and finally, Patriarch of the Serbs (1930-1937).

The events at Raskoprizen, where the Ecumenical Patriarchate appointed a Serbian metropolitan in 1896, and those of the years 1899-1902 in Skoplje, where a Serb metropolitan was ordained in 1902,²⁶ make up two other chapters of the same subject to which, however, our sources bear no relationship. The episcopal question in the relationship between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Serbian Church was permanently solved during the Balkan wars when the provinces of Old Serbia and Northern Macedonia were annexed by Serbia. A few years later, by a special act of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (dated March 19, 1920), Protocol file 2056) the dioceses belonging to these provinces were brought under the administrative and spiritual jurisdiction of the Serbian Church.²⁷

Conclusion

The following conclusions may be drawn from this research:

(a) The quarrel between the Patriarchal Serbs and the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the dioceses of Old Serbia and Northern Macedonia, brought about by the Serbian propaganda, was an error of the Serbian diplomacy. The danger

24. *Ibid.*, file 60, documents 1130 with two copies attached therein.

25. Angelopoulos A., "Τὸ ἐπισκοπικὸν ζήτημα τῆς ἐπαρχίας Δεβρών καὶ Βελισσοῦ". (The Episcopal Question of the Province of Dibar and Veles) *Makedonika*, 11(1970)p.272-283.

26. On the Metropolitan Question of Skoplje in detail on the Serb side, see N. Dučić, *op. cit.*, pp.3-24. On the Greek side, see D. Philippides, *Τὸ Φιρμιλιάνειον Ζήτημα* (The Firmilianion Question), Athens 1903, pp.1-51.

27. «Γρηγόριος Παλαμᾶς» 4 (1920) pp.602-603. These dioceses are Skoplje, Debar, Veles, Pelagonjia, Prespa-Achrida, Polyanni and Stromnitsa.

to the Serbs proceeded from the Bulgarian Exarchate and not from the Ecumenical Patriarchate which until then had been the sole supporter of the Patriarchal Serbs against the Exarchate. The latter had succeeded in dividing them into supporters of the Exarchate and to those of the Patriarchate. These tactics made the relationship between the two Churches difficult during a critical period for the Serb communities.

(b) The Ecumenical Patriarchate, in spite of all the pressures on the dioceses by the Serbian propaganda remained true to its Pan-Orthodox mission. In the beginning, it contributed to the Serbian school movement with its local dioceses and, later on, after some justifiable hesitation, caused by the unbecoming attitude of some Serbs, appointed Serbian bishops to a few of the dioceses under its jurisdiction. This contribution has not been adequately appreciated especially by a certain section of Serbian bibliography which keeps on repeating even to this day the inaccurate views about the Ecumenical Patriarchate having been an instrument for the promotion of the interests of only the Greeks. The principles which the Ecumenical Patriarchate followed and still follows are totally different from those of the Greek, Russian, Turkish and Serbian diplomacy. All of these have interfered with the internal affairs of the Patriarchate, which could only offer opposition through its spiritual and canonical power and authority. Basically, however, it has been the kind and loving mother of all her faithful children whom she emancipated only when the canonical prerequisites and provisions permitted.

(c) Specifically, as regards the ethnological make-up of the Christian population of parts of Dibar, Kirčevo and Veles during the period under investigation (1885-1912), sources we have found indicate it has been of Serbian, Bulgarian, and Greek mind. There were two large and prosperous Greek communities in Kirčevo and Veles, the seats of the homonymous administrative subdivisions, as well as many smaller ones. There also were many Serbian and still more Bulgarian communities.

APPENDIX *

Holy Diocese of Dibar and Veles*

The Holy Diocese of Dibar and Veles certifies that Andreas Grosdanović from Prezren has obtained our permission to teach in the village of Pasakioj of the province of Veles during the academic year 1891-1892 already in progress. This certificate is given to him to that effect.

The Holy Diocese of Veles
September 22, 1891

The trustee to the Metropolitan
of Dibar and Veles
Oikonomos P. Demetrios

The schedule of the courses to be offered in the school of the village Pasakioi during the fall semester of the academic year 1891-1892.

Primer
Reader
Religion
Writing
Arithmetic

All these are offered daily.

Veles,
September 22, 1891
The teacher
Andreas Grosdanović
The Episcopal trustee who certifies
Oikonomos P. Demetrios

* This is a translation of a document from the Archives of the Diocese of Thessaloniki, File 60, 1077.

