

In Defense of Darwin

Is there a Liberal Wing within the Serbian Orthodox Church?

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This chapter tackles the public appeal of twelve theologians, professors on the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Belgrade, in defense of the autonomy of academic research. Their public statement, issued in May 2017, was soon after criticized by the hierarchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), while these theologians were reprimanded and sanctioned by the Holy Council of Bishops and the Patriarch of Serbia. In the forthcoming appraisal, this event will serve as a case study regarding the possible emergence of liberal currents within the SOC, which is otherwise largely considered a conservative, nationalist religious institution whose authority is rarely disputed not only by its own clergy, but also by the secular Serbian authorities.

“HERESY OF EVOLUTIONISM” AND ITS ORTHODOX ADVOCATES

It will be helpful to begin by providing a résumé of the events that preceded the publication of the disputed public appeal (known as *Stav*). On May 4, 2017, the document entitled, “A Petition for the Revision of Study of the Theory of Evolution in our Schools and Faculties”¹ appeared in public after it had already been addressed to the following Serbian state institutions: the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, the Committee for Education, Science and Technological Development of the Serbian Parliament the Presidency of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and the senate committees of all universities in Serbia. The *Petition* was signed by 166 individuals and pub-

1 V. Andrić, L. Valtner, S. Čongradin, “Dekan Biološkog fakulteta: Potpuno anahrone i nenaučne ideje,” *Danas*, May 5, 2017, <https://www.danas.rs/politika/dekan-biološkog-fakulteta-potpuno-anahrone-i-nenaučne-ideje/>.

lic figures, most of whom had some background in science and education.² The authors of the *Petition* critically assessed the Theory of Evolution, and invited the aforementioned state institutions to “revise” study programs in schools and at universities in cases where they were based on the Neo-Darwinist Theory of Evolution. Furthermore, they accused evolutionary biologists of promoting their “false science” for “personal and globalist reasons.”³ Last but not least, this document displays elements of various conspiracy theories, referring to some unspecified “power centers” that, allegedly, financially support such biologists.

Less than a week later, a group of twelve theologians, professors at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology,⁴ reacted to the *Petition* in public and stated that “in the school curricula of biology, at all educational levels, there is nothing that could currently replace the theory of evolution.”⁵ Moreover, “none of the institutions, recipients of this petition, has jurisdiction to interfere in any area of science and perform ‘revision’ of a scientific theory that is studied by, and taught to, students.”⁶ They further reminded their readers that similar initiatives for “revision” could not, at least in principle, be launched by groups of citizens (notwithstanding their number or reputation), but only by science and its relevant disciplines, such as biology, that is, by a community of experts with an appropriate level of expertise. These theologians also referred to the long-term scientific practice, based on research, which made possible civilizational progress. Accordingly, the signers of the *Petition* were invited to conduct their own research and propose theories alternative to the Theory of Evolution; there are no shortcuts for this procedure. In fact, there are “no plausible alternative scientific theories that could replace” the Theory of Evolution. This includes the “biblical creation theory,” which is not a scientific alternative to the Theory of Evolution. Therefore, the Bible is not a textbook pertaining to a scientific discipline. For example, the

2 <https://pescanik.net/nauka-i-vera/>. A full PDF version of the *Petition*, which was addressed to the Parliament of Serbia, is linked to this reference.

3 Ibid.

4 More precisely, this list included 11 professors and one teaching assistant, as follows: Bishop Maksim Vasiljević, Professor of Patristics; Fr. Radomir Popović, Professor of Christian History; Fr. Vladan Perišić, Associate Professor of Christian Epistemology; Predrag Dragutinović, Associate Professor of the New Testament; Rade Kisić, Associate Professor of Ecumenical Theology; Marko Vilotić, Assistant Professor of Theology and Christian Philosophy; Andrej Jeftić, Assistant Professor of Patristics; Nenad Božović, Assistant Professor of the Old Testament; Fr. Aleksandar Đakovac, Assistant Professor of Dogmatic Theology; Fr. Zoran Devrnja, Assistant Professor at the Department of Canon Law; Dn. Zdravko Jovanović, Assistant Professor at the Department of Patristics and Fr. Vukašin Milićević, then a teaching assistant at the Department of Systematic Theology (now Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics).

5 “Profesori Bogoslovije: Teorija evolucije nema zamenu,” *Danas*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/profesori-bogoslovije-teorija-evolucije-nema-zamenu/>.

6 “Profesori Bogoslovije: Teorija evolucije nema zamenu.”

Book of Genesis does not even belong to this genre of literature. There may be studies in schools within the programs of religious education, literature, art and philosophy, but this is not science, notwithstanding its importance for education and the value systems of students. “Insofar as the Christian interpretation of the Bible cannot provide a valid scientific alternative to biology, biology itself (or for that matter, physics or anthropology) may not offer a valid religious alternative to the Christian doctrine of God, human being and the world.”⁷ The theologians concluded by expressing their hope and trust that the relevant state institutions would not launch any process that could compromise the study of the Theory of Evolution in elementary, high school, and university education in the Republic of Serbia.⁸

Some of the professors who signed this public statement provided additional explanations and comments regarding their document. Andrej Jeftić, Assistant Professor of Theology (Patristics), emphasized that their statement was not an official announcement of the Orthodox Faculty of Theology, but only an expression of views of professors and assistants who signed the document.⁹ According to the former dean of this Faculty, Prof. Predrag Puzović, the institution itself would not publicly comment on the *Petition*. His view was that it would be best to organize a conference and invite both the proponents and the critics of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution. Their views and arguments should later be published in a special collection of articles. He also confirmed that the signers of the public appeal against the *Petition* would not be sanctioned by the Faculty because of their private opinions.¹⁰ Although the SOC does not, at least in principle, appoint teachers at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, the Holy Synod, as the main executive body of the Church, provides blessings (*missio canonica*) to all professors at this institution prior to their appointments. A teaching assistant is blessed by a designated prelate, that is to say, by a bishop in jurisdictions of his eparchy. Professor Pribislav Simić, another former Dean of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, explained that the Church could not fire any professor at this institution, because they were hired and paid by the state. However, the SOC may ask for the removal of a professor if their teachings are in contradiction with the articles of faith, or if their behavior is inappropriate or immoral. In those cases, the Holy Synod is empowered by the Faculty’s statute to “withdraw,” as it were, its

⁷ “Profesori Bogoslovije: Teorija evolucije nema zamenu.”

⁸ “Profesori Bogoslovije: Teorija evolucije nema zamenu.”

⁹ Darko Pejović, “Podrška Darvinu s Pravoslavnog Bogoslovskog fakulteta,” *Politika*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/380253/Profesori-Bogoslovije-protiv-peticije-za-ukidanje-Darvina>.

¹⁰ Pejović, “Podrška Darvinu s Pravoslavnog Bogoslovskog fakulteta.”

blessing to a certain professor.¹¹ Simić concluded that in this particular case “the SOC overreacted. Maybe they just wanted to stay in touch with the contemporary scientific currents, without thinking through the consequences, or knowing enough about the theory of evolution.”

Concerning the theological position of the Eastern Orthodoxy vis-à-vis the Theory of Evolution, one could admit that it is not tied to any particular dogmatic viewpoint. It is more often the case that different theologians adhere to either compatibilist or dualistic positions. Briefly put, compatibilists contend that the Theory of Evolution and Christian theology are congruent, and thus should be considered complementary revelations of God. On the other hand, the dualists adhere to the view that evolutionary theory has its roots in the philosophy of naturalism and, as such, is incompatible with divine revelation.¹² It seems, however, that in this case doctrinal issues were not the primary reason for the negative reaction of the SOC high officials to the Faculty theologians. After all, the entire dispute did not arise within the Orthodox theological turfs, but instead through a modern theological opposition to Serbian creationists with a lay background. Later on in this chapter, I will argue that the negative institutional reaction of the SOC leadership should, in fact, be placed in a larger context of the ecclesiastical and political power structures that involve not only the higher clergy, but Serbian political leadership as well. Moreover, the joint demand from the rebellious clerics—notwithstanding an issue under consideration—is their uncompromised obedience to authorities. At any rate, this case was perhaps a necessary trigger that prompted the University of Belgrade to more precisely define the SOC’s (that is, the Holy Synod’s) relations with the Faculty of Theology. This Faculty joined the ranks of the University of Belgrade in 2004 after half a century of an institutional hiatus,¹³ but in practice its internal administration and regulation has not been fully adjusted to the state legislation. Until very recently, the SOC—which, according to the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, is separate from the state—did not have much involvement (tacit or more visible) in the administrative decisions made at the Faculty. As for the

¹¹ Unfortunately, the new Serbian Law on Higher Education, passed in 2021, only cemented the procedures administered by the Faculty of Orthodox Theology with regard to the enrollment of students, and the selection and dismissal of its professors. This Law, in fact, seriously infringed university autonomy which is a right guaranteed by the Constitution.

¹² Konstantin Bufojević, *Jeres evolucionizma*, in *Neka bude svetlost – stvaranje sveta i rani čovek: Pravoslavno tumačenje Knjige Postanja* (Belgrade, 2006), 570–619.

¹³ From 1952 to 2004, the Faculty was not part of the University of Belgrade, because the post-WWII socialist authorities in Yugoslavia placed it under the jurisdiction of the SOC. Throughout this period, it operated as the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

state institutions, recipients of the *Petition*, the Senate of the University of Belgrade condemned the Petition due to its arbitrary conclusions and untrue statements.¹⁴ As such, it did not deserve the attention of the academic and professional public: “No scientific theory is beyond reproach, but serious theoretical discussions should not neglect facts or ignore scientific procedures and violate valid logical argumentation.”¹⁵

In this context, it is interesting to note that the regular session of the Holy Council of Bishops of the SOC started in mid-May 2017, only a few days after the public reaction of the young theologians. The Serbian press reported that one of the signers of this public statement, Bishop Maksim, was criticized at the very outset of this event, but he vigorously defended his own, and his colleagues’ position.¹⁶ According to the church hierarchy, the theology professors should not have intervened in the public discussion on Darwin’s Theory of Evolution. Some bishops interpreted the statement as lack of a belief of its signers in the biblical account of the creation. Even before the convocation of the Bishops’ Council, the theology professors were warned that their public statement was a mistake.¹⁷ The polemics continued during the Council’s official sessions, while Bishop Maksim was labeled as a “Darwinist,” that is, as one who believes that man originated from apes and not from God.¹⁸ Needless to say, this kind of “argumentation” is far from any valid modern theological position. Notwithstanding these accusations, Bishop Maksim was not deposed from his ecclesiastical rank or his professorship at the Faculty of Theology. As a result of this criticism, the signers of the public appeal were invited to officially address the Holy Council of Bishops (*Sabor*). According to the spokesperson of the SOC, “the signers of this text addressed the Sabor, confessing their authentic Christian belief in God the Creator.”¹⁹ In written form, they quoted reasons why they signed their public appeal against the revision of the school and university curricula regarding the Theory of Evolution. The Sabor “accepted this with the comment that this entire discussion, regardless of its intent, was unnecessary.”²⁰

14 Pejović, “Podrška Darvinu s Pravoslavnog Bogoslovskog fakulteta.” Dean of the Faculty of Theology is a member of the University Senate.

15 Pejović, “Podrška Darvinu s Pravoslavnog Bogoslovskog fakulteta.”

16 “Darvin ili Gospod – rasprava na Saboru SPC,” *B92*, May 19, 2017, https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2017&mm=05&dd=19&nav_category=12&nav_id=1262090.

17 “Darvin ili Gospod.”

18 “Darvin ili Gospod.”

19 Vladimir Veljković, “Sabor SPC i sloboda misli,” *Peščanik*, May 29, 2017, <https://pescanik.net/sabor-spc-i-sloboda-misli/>.

20 Veljković, “Sabor SPC i sloboda misli.”

Nonetheless, this was not the end of the entire affair. Very soon after the dismissal of the Council of Bishops, the university teachers of theology were deprived of their priestly duties in their eparchies. They were allowed only to assist in liturgies. Moreover, they were let go from their positions in the official church media, such as the Radio *Slovo ljubve* and the bimonthly *Pravoslavlje*, the official journal of the SOC. The decision was made by the then Patriarch Irinej himself. The Patriarch also prohibited these professors from giving further public statements without his approval: "Whoever violates this rule will be sanctioned in a church-disciplinary process."²¹ It is interesting that this decision (effective June 1, 2017) was not published on the official website of the SOC, or on the web portals of these priests' eparchies, which is probably an indication of its rather controversial nature.

However, entirely different reactions came from the Eparchy of Zahumlje-Herzegovina, known for its theological conferences in the area of social and natural sciences. This manifestation, held in Trebinje (Bosnia-Herzegovina), strongly advances the culture of dialogue and free discussion. To date, six conferences were attended by over 100 academics, university professors, Orthodox and Roman Catholic prelates, Islamic theologians and writers and artists from 10 countries in Europe, as well as the US and Canada. At one of those conferences, "Theology in Public Sphere," one could have heard arguments and opinions very similar to the statements of the Belgrade theologians, the signers of the public appeal. As a matter of fact, a significant number of these theologians participate in this event on a regular, annual basis.²² The 2017 conference was opened by Dragan Davidović, director of the Secretariat for Faith of Republika Srpska, an institution that, according to his words, supports "free thinking and different points of view of all participants."²³ In 2017, this eparchy was under the jurisdiction of Bishop Grigorije (Durić), and later on I will pay some more attention to his own liberal proclivities.

If we now take into account the legislation of the Republic of Serbia, primarily the Law on Higher Education, a group of theologians who criticized the *Petition* in public did not have any obligation to explain their position on Darwin's

21 Jelena Popadić, "Muk na Bogoslovskom fakultetu posle čistke zbog Darvina," *Politika*, June 6, 2017, <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/382287/Muk-na-Bogoslovskom-fakultetu-posle-cistke-zbog-Darvina>.

22 For example, in 2017 the list of participants included Vladan Perišić, Rade Kisić, Marko Vilotić, Andrej Jeftić, Zdravko Jovanović and Vukašin Milićević, all of whom are professors at the Faculty of Theology and signers of the public appeal. Among the participants in 2018 and 2019, we also find Predrag Dragutinović and Aleksandar Đakovac. Interestingly enough, the topic of the 2020 conference was Theology between the Church and the University.

23 Veljković, "Sabor SPC i sloboda misli."

theory or creation doctrine to any particular institution, be it religious or secular. As academics, they had a full freedom of expression of their intellectual ideas and moral views. Article 5 of the Law on the Higher Education of the Republic of Serbia (2016) clearly stipulates that academic freedoms include “freedom of research and scientific work, art production, as well as the freedom of publication and public presentation of the scientific results and art accomplishments.” According to the Law on the Churches and Religious Communities (2006), faith institutions do have the right to independently organize their internal and public affairs (article 6), but, at the same time, “religious educational institutions included in the educational system are obligated to respect conditions and standards valid in the system of education, in line with its legislation” (article 37).²⁴ After all, this group publicly opposed the attempts to use the Bible, and its description of creation, as a basis for denying the Theory of Evolution. On the other hand, the members of the Bishops’ Council deprived the university professors of their right to publicly present views pertaining to their academic area of expertise. Accordingly, the Council members interfered in the freedom and autonomy of the university, and challenged the legal and constitutional rights of these professors (freedom of thought and expression). However, at that time, there was no reaction from the relevant state institutions or the University of Belgrade concerning the legal ramifications of this case.

HAWKS AND DOVES

In the volume edited by Sabrina Ramet, Radmila Radić and I have argued that by the mid-1990s there were rumors within the SOC about the existence of two different factions: the zealots and the moderates, or the “hawks and doves.”²⁵ Their differences were expressed in some dogmatic issues, as well as on questions concerning the SOC’s view of national identity, political engagement, priesthood, religious education, ecumenism, etc. By 1998, the disagreements among the bishops were so significant that they could have even caused an internal schism. Even so, the late professor Radovan Bigović, a prominent SOC theolo-

²⁴ Zakon o crkvama i verskim zajednicama, https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_crkvama_i_verskim_zajednicama.html.

²⁵ Radmila Radić and Milan Vukomanović, “Religion and Democracy in Serbia since 1989: The Case of the Serbian Orthodox Church,” in *Religion and politics in post-socialist Central and Southeastern Europe: Challenges since 1989*, ed. Sabrina Ramet (London and New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014), 188.

gian, stated the opposite: “The claims that there are ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ within the Church are completely senseless, although I heard them many times. But I have not learned the criteria for the demarcation.”²⁶ On that occasion, Bigović admitted the existence of differences between some bishops, but he did not find them substantial. Indeed, all the major schisms or dissents within the SOC were motivated by political reasons (for example, the schism in the diaspora of 1963).²⁷ In contrast, one could hardly expect the SOC clergy (considering their hierarchical, paternalistic institutional structure) to admit that there are any gaps within their higher ecclesiastical ranks. The most one could expect in this matter is perhaps an understatement concerning the possible personal disagreements between some bishops, but not a straightforward confirmation of any ideological or doctrinal rifts. This, of course, does not mean that such rifts have not existed, especially from the standpoint of a neutral observer, including a scholar. Let us therefore attempt to provide some contextual framework for this rather controversial issue.

Historically, the SOC, like the majority of other Orthodox churches, evolved in predominantly non-democratic political contexts (medieval states, the Byzantine Empire, Ottoman conquests, communist rule, etc.). Because of that, an excessive hierarchical control and domination took place, including the passivity of the clergy and lay indifference. To this, one should add the principle of obedience and seniority among bishops, the strict rule that the younger prelates are obedient to the senior ones.

A new element that has emerged in the post-socialist period—something that the Church previously experienced only in the diaspora (that is, in the democratic countries in which its eparchies had been present for some time)—is a whole range of open issues and problems concerning democracy, modernity, national culture, education, religious and political pluralism, civil society and church-state relations. For example, what is the exact scope of social problems that belong in the domain of religious institutions’ concerns and constitutional ramifications? How capable are religious organizations to deal with those problems, and what is their capacity to solve them? How relevant are their responses to contemporary social, legal and political issues? Is Orthodoxy, then, compatible with democracy, seen not only as the will of the majority or a political election procedure, but also as the political culture of pluralism and rule of law? Can

²⁶ Radić and Vukomanović, “Religion and Democracy in Serbia since 1989,” 188.

²⁷ Radmila Radić, “Srpska pravoslavna crkva tokom 90-ih,” *Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne*, no. 10 (2016): 266.

we conceive of a “civic Orthodoxy” more in line with Western democracy and pluralism? Such a civic religion could be compatible with democracy, but a dogmatic essentialism, rejecting the possibility of cultural change and scientific progress could not. In this sense, globalization in non-Western societies does not necessarily entail an adoption of Western cultural values and norms. Today, those norms also include the secular values of civil society that is not Christian (Orthodox, Catholic, etc.), Islamic, or Jewish, but instead international in its character.²⁸ The demands for human rights based on common secular values and the democratic political culture are primary in this context. Thus, one needs a consensus between Orthodoxy and secular political philosophy regarding the fundamental values, such as democracy, civil society, pluralistic discourse, secular tolerance and individual human rights.

On the other hand, the views of the most prominent Serbian theologians of the twentieth century, Nikolaj Velimirović and Justin Popović, about the secular and “de-Christianized” West and Europe are, even nowadays, often cited in Serbia by both theologians and historians. Those views have been uncritically reproduced in the books and at the public fora of the leading conservative bishops, the “hawks” (“Justinians”), such as Atanasije Jevtić, Irinej Bulović and the late Amfilohije Radović.²⁹ Nikolaj Velimirović, who was canonized in 2003 as a Serbian saint, is particularly influential in this regard. Velimirović’s sermons against Europe, its “idolatry and corruption” are scattered throughout his opus. Some of his basic ideas could be summarized as follows:

1. Europe cannot survive without Christianity; the three “fatal spirits” of European civilization are Darwin, Nietzsche and Marx, who propagated fatal theories in natural sciences, ethics and social theory.
2. The French Encyclopedists declared war on religion and, consequently, the European Enlightenment is another adversary of Christianity and Europe.
3. Other enemies include: the “absolutism of science”, the wars and revolutions in Europe from Friedrich the Great to the 20th century, proletarian ideologies and the domination of economy and materialism.³⁰

²⁸ Bassam Tibi, *Political Islam, World Politics and Europe* (London: Routledge, 2008), 230.

²⁹ To this group of bishops I would add the former Serbian Orthodox Bishop Artemije (Radosavljević), but one should remember that in 2010 he was deposed from that office by the Holy Council of Bishops. In 2015, he was even excommunicated from the SOC.

³⁰ Milan Vukomanović, “The Serbian Orthodox Church: Between Traditionalism and Fundamentalism,” in *Fundamentalism in the Modern World*, vol. 1, ed. Ulrika Martensson et al. (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 157–58.

The SOC representatives, particularly the higher clergy, often express their fear of the destruction of the “true faith” by openly resisting the secularization of the modern (Western) world. They argue that modern society is seriously ill, and in order for it to “heal itself,” it is necessary to return to the original interpretation of the *eschaton*, i.e., to refer to an authentic Christian interpretation of eschatology, because Christian ontology derives from it. According to this SOC discourse, the most reliable guide for such a course is the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Instead of initiating a dialogue with the modern world, the SOC hence opts to officially condemn it, by withdrawing into its own, self-imposed hermeneutical and liturgical “ghetto.”³¹ In his *Runaway World*, Anthony Giddens presents an interesting thesis, namely that the spirit of cosmopolitanism and the spirit of fundamentalism are two different and opposed reactions to the process of globalization. Fundamentalism is thus tradition defined in the traditional manner, invoking the ritual truth in an increasingly global world looking for reasons.³²

However, after the collapse of communism, the Church tore down the walls of its liturgical ghetto. The historical model of symphony with the state has enabled the SOC to offer a new ideological framework and symbolic-normative system for state institutions in Serbia. The SOC’s opposition to EU integration, democracy, ecumenism and the secular worldview, and its post-2000 attempts to impose itself as an authority in the sphere of culture and public education,³³ are all factors that pull the SOC towards religious ultra-conservatism. After all, the conservative current within the Church has always had an advantage because the SOC is under the major influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow.³⁴

It is no accident that in this context the SOC’s sharpest criticism is reserved for Serbian educators, or pro-pluralism and pro-Europe “new ideologues,” “Euro-whiners” and “New-Agers,” independent intellectuals and activists. In a metaphysical and even apocalyptic tone, the views of these opponents are rejected as

31 Vukomanović, “The Serbian Orthodox Church,” 153.

32 Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives* (New York: Routledge), 2000.

33 See Milan Vukomanović, “The Serbian Orthodox Church as a Political Actor in the Aftermath of October 5, 2000,” *Politics and Religion*, vol. 1, issue 2 (August 2008): 240.

34 The more recent illustration of this is the November 2018 statement of the SOC Holy Council of Bishops, in which the Serbian prelates criticized the Ecumenical Patriarchate for its decisions regarding the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The SOC Council of Bishops called “canonically unjustified” the decision of Constantinople to rehabilitate the leaders of the Ukrainian dissenters Filaret Denisenko and Macarius of Miletich, and stated that this act has no effect for the SOC (<https://chelorg.com/2018/11/12/the-serbian-church-does-not-recognize-the-withdrawal-of-the-anathemas-from-constantinople-philaret/>). At the same time, SOC has not broken its official ties with the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

non-Christian, anti-Christian, pro-globalization and pro-Western, even pro-communist. This primarily relates to their secularism, which is misinterpreted as a remnant of communist atheism. At stake here is a general lack of sensitivity for and insight into the problems of contemporary society and developments—including a severe absence of understanding the crucial distinction between the communist ideological and authoritarian atheism, and modern liberal-democratic forms of secularization rooted in the Enlightenment.³⁵

It seems, however, that the outset of the twenty-first century Serbia saw the emergence of a small liberal wing within the SOC, more open to the aforementioned secular influences. From time to time, their liberal proclivities could be detected in public speeches and media interviews, more than in official church gatherings and ecclesiastical bodies. In my opinion, this group includes the following bishops: Grigorije (Durić), Maksim (Vasiljević), Teodosije (Šibalić), Joanikije (Mićović), Lavrentije (Trifunović), Ignatije (Midić), Andrej (Čilerdžić) and Irinej (Dobrijević). Interestingly enough, half of these prelates serve today as bishops in the Western diaspora—the US, Austria-Switzerland, and Germany (Maksim, Irinej, Andrej, Grigorije), while the senior ones (such as Lavrentije) served in the diaspora in the twentieth century. It is also important to note that the liberal attitude of these bishops varies depending on a theme under consideration, and does not automatically refer to all the issues in a public debate. For example, most (if not all) of these bishops would have a rather unified ecclesiastical-political view of Kosovo, although they would express a much more flexible attitude regarding science, education, human rights, ecumenical dialogue, etc. In February 2021, Bishop Grigorije and Bishop Joanikije, two candidates from this liberal turf, were proposed by their peers for the new Patriarch of Serbia, winning more than one-third of the Holy Council of Bishops' votes, respectively. Moreover, after a long period of time—during which the patriarchal position was occupied by a senior prelate—Metropolitan Porfirije (Perić), another relatively younger bishop (b. 1961) has eventually occupied St. Sava's throne.

It seems that the positions of the theologians, signers of the public appeal regarding the Theory of Evolution, display some traits of this kind of liberal influence within the SOC and its Faculty of Theology. These influences normally flow through at least two channels of communication: 1) from the more liberal senior professors (including some bishops, such as Maksim) to junior lecturers (assistant professors and TA's) at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology; and 2) from the more liberal bishops to younger priests (some of whom are also junior faculty)

35 Vukomanović, "The Serbian Orthodox Church," 167.

under their ecclesiastical supervision or jurisdiction. I contend that these possible influences created a relatively free intellectual environment at the Faculty itself, especially if we take into account that, due to generational renewal, most of the Justinian “hawks” (such as the late Metropolitan Amfilohije or the late Bishop Atanasije) are not teaching there anymore. Another important element that should be taken into consideration in this context is certainly the educational background of at least some of the junior faculty, as they were additionally educated at, or received degrees from other, secular institutions at the University of Belgrade (for example, Faculty of Philosophy: departments of history, philosophy, etc.). Finally, most of them pertain to a generation that has intellectually come of age during the post-socialist period. This means that they have acquired new scholarly and pedagogical paradigms, and were not so much burdened by the political heritage of ethnic nationalism and ecclesiastical authoritarianism.

I have already mentioned how Bishop Maksim vigorously defended the position of his younger colleagues at the Holy Council of Bishops in May 2017. Two years later, at the spring session of the same Council, Maksim debated with the conservative Bishop Irinej (Bulović) concerning the “Ukrainian ecclesiastical issue.”³⁶ Apparently, Maksim advocated a minority position within the SOC that was not in line with the general pro-Russian proclivity of the Serbian episcopate. In addition, Bishop Irinej published a Council document regarding the alleged “case” of Bishop Maksim.³⁷ Eventually, on July 8, 2019, Maksim was deposed from his professorship at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology by the decision of the Holy Synod.³⁸ This unexpected decision of the high ecclesiastical body applied to yet another professor who signed *Stav*—Prof. Marko Vilotić, now Secretary of Bishop Grigorije in his German eparchy. One of the official reasons for those sudden discharges was related to the engagement of the two clerics in the diaspora affairs of the SOC, following their alleged inability to regularly teach at their Belgrade faculty. Nevertheless, this Synodic decision was not confirmed by Bishop Ignatije, the then Dean of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, so that the Holy Synod consequently withdrew its blessing to the Dean for his “disrespect” of the Synod. As a result of this, Bishop Ignatije resigned from his position on November 12, 2019.³⁹ Until 2024, two more professors who signed the *Stav* document (Andrej Jeftić and Vukašin Milićević) were ousted from their Faculty. This led to another institutional crisis within the Faculty of Theology,

³⁶ Daily *Danas*, July 24, 2019, 5.

³⁷ Daily *Danas*, July 24, 2019, 5.

³⁸ Daily *Danas*, July 24, 2019, 5.

³⁹ Daily *Danas*, November 13, 2019, 7.

related to the Statute of the University of Belgrade. Specifically, the University Statutory Committee found that the Synod's involvement in the Faculty of Orthodox Theology affairs (by granting of the *missio canonica* for teaching appointments and enrollment of students) was not in accordance with the university regulations and the Law on Higher Education. Therefore, the University, as the legal founder of this Faculty, has not approved the deposition of the two theologians. Moreover, the University declared the election of the new faculty administration to be illegal.⁴⁰

Apart from Maksim, some other bishops from this liberal group, such as Grigorije and Teodosije, have also been more pronounced in the Serbian media during the last several years. I will therefore quote some of their statements that represent a sort of refreshing novelty in the public discourse of the SOC prelates.

Bishop Grigorije (b. 1967) belongs to the same generation as Maksim (1968). Prior to his deployment to Germany in 2018, he was the bishop of Zahumlje-Herzegovina since 1999. There, he succeeded the throne of an ultra-conservative cleric, Bishop Atanasije Jevtić. Already as a student, Grigorije organized anti-Milošević demonstrations in Serbia. Today, he is well known for his support of ecumenical dialogue and social responsibility. He is noted for having said, "Do not build so many churches while our hospitals collapse and children die!"⁴¹ And also: "Christ was a corporate personality. Every bishop should be a corporate person. Our behavior should be like that, we should be all things to all people and do the best we can in service of life and citizens. While doing so, we have nothing to be afraid of, and we should go our own way."⁴² As a bishop in Herzegovina, Grigorije asked for forgiveness regarding the war crimes in Bosnia and the destruction of Dubrovnik. This event took place at the Dubrovnik Roman Catholic Cathedral. The bishop of Dubrovnik responded accordingly, which marked a new stage in Orthodox-Catholic dialogue in the Balkans.⁴³

In a 2016 interview for N1 TV (a media branch of CNN in the Balkans), Grigorije emphasized: "We should not live in fear from others, but should live for others. If someone violates our freedom, this is perilous... With my entire being, I believe in the richness of diversity, and I think that we should be happy and content because of that; because we have an opportunity to live in such di-

⁴⁰ Weekly *NIN*, February 13, 2020, 30-31.

⁴¹ "Proteruju Vladiku Grigorija: Crkva ga šalje na 'KAZNENU EKSPEDICIJU' u Nemačku," *Srbija Danas*, May 24, 2018, <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/region/vladika-grigorije-otac-na-sluzbenom-putu-2018-05-24>.

⁴² "Vladika Grigorije o Nikoliću: Popili, popričali kao ljudi," *N1*, January 6, 2016, <https://n1info.rs/region/a124131-vladika-grigorije-o-nikolicu-popili-popricali-kao-ljudi/>.

⁴³ "Vladika Grigorije o Nikoliću."

versity... We cannot say that anyone can shut themselves in a closed unit without receiving other influences. Our advantage is to have our own identity and receive what is good from others. This makes us healthy.”⁴⁴

Bishop Grigorije is also known as a sharp critic of internal affairs within the SOC. Back in 2008, he wrote a letter to the Council of Bishops, referring to some serious problems within the episcopate, and naming some of the prelates for their unacceptable behavior. This letter was not meant to be published, but it nevertheless found its way to the media. It was published at the time of crisis for the SOC, because the late Patriarch Pavle was seriously ill and the Bishops' Council had to consider the option of his early retirement. Grigorije went a step further, proposing the lustration of some bishops, including Pahomije (accused of pedophilia),⁴⁵ Filaret, who cooperated with the Milošević regime during the 1990s (for financial misconduct), Artemije (who set the foundation for a schism) and Bishop Nikanor. The lustration of clergy was a process conducted in some other formerly communist states, such as Romania, Bulgaria and Russia. In his letter, Grigorije also alluded to infiltration of the secret police in the SOC, and invited the Church to conduct more transparent activities. Furthermore, he criticized the religious education program in public schools administered by the SOC, as well as the prolonged construction of St Sava's Orthodox Temple in Belgrade. Finally, he referred to the lack of an active bishop in the capital city of Belgrade.⁴⁶ Interestingly enough, most of the clerics named in Grigorije's letter were deposed or retired in the following years. All of them were known as members of the ultra-conservative current within the Church. Today, Grigorije supports the group of “rebellious” professors from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, and openly opposes the tacit coalition between the Holy Synod and the current political regime in Serbia led by Aleksandar Vučić. In the most recent period, this criticism has been directed against Vučić's policy regarding the possible solution of the status of Kosovo.

⁴⁴ “Vladika Grigorije o Nikoliću.”

⁴⁵ Bishop Joanikije, another SOC prelate from this liberal group, is also known for his fierce criticism of the SOC bishops accused of pedophilia. On one occasion in 2013, as reported by the Serbian press, he tried to prevent Bishop Vasilije (Kačavenda) from administering a liturgy in the city of Srbobran (Vojvodina province). According to some sources, Bishop Vasilije suffered a stroke in the aftermath of this quarrel: “Kačavendu napao vladika, pa doživeo moždani udar!”, *Kurir*, September 9, 2013, <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/996733/kacavendu-napao-vladika-pa-doziveo-mozdani-udar>. At the Council of Bishops in May 2013, Bishop Joanikije demanded that Bishop Vasilije be prosecuted before the Church court, but his proposal did not win the majority support (Z. Jevtić, “Grupa episkopa branila bludnog Kačavendu pred Sinodom SPC,” *Blic*, May 30, 2013, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/tema-dana/grupa-episkopa-branila-bludnog-kacavendu-pred-sinodom-spc/txf09rv>).

⁴⁶ The integral version of this letter is available at: https://www.glassrpske.com/novosti/vijesti_dana/Pismo-Vladike-Grigorija-Arhijerejima-SPC/lat/15007.html.

THE KOSOVO COVENANT

In 2010, Bishop Teodosije (b. 1963) succeeded the eparchy under the jurisdiction of the deposed Bishop Artemije, one of the “hawks” within the SOC, who died of COVID-19 in 2020. The seat of the eparchy of Raška-Prizren is in the monastery Visoki Dečani in Kosovo, the biggest male monastery of the SOC, and a safe haven for civilians during the war of 1999 and its aftermath. This is where Teodosije organized humanitarian aid for the local population, notwithstanding their ethnic or religious background. Known as a moderate person and minister, Teodosije inherited the difficult mission of protecting the local Orthodox population during the period of the frozen conflict between Belgrade and Priština, and the subsequent political negotiations under the supervision of the European Union (EU). Part of this task was to protect the Church’s property, real estate and historic landmarks in Kosovo.

The heritage of the late Bishop Artemije, an ultra-conservative prelate in Kosovo, was highly controversial and, at some point, could have caused a serious schism within the SOC.⁴⁷ Artemije’s view of Kosovo was almost eschatological. Let me illustrate this by a few of his quotations: “Kosovo is not about geography, but about ideology, it is an ideal... whoever thinks differently is only biologically a Serb, but not in the spirit.”⁴⁸ Or, again, Kosovo is “our spiritual and cultural cradle, our Serb Jerusalem. What Jerusalem is for the Jewish people, Kosovo and Metohija is for the Serbian people.”⁴⁹ Even the late Patriarch Irinej went so far as to exclaim that Kosovo independence would be a “sin,” and that this province should be “defended with blood.”⁵⁰ During the patriarchate of Pavle (2008), the SOC issued an Easter message that corresponded to the eschatological view of Bishop Artemije:

Kosovo and Metohija are not only about the Serbian territory. Above all, it is about spiritual being, because we used to be born with Kosovo and Metohija, we used to grow and live with it as individuals and as a people, we lived and died with the Kosovo covenant... this is why the question of Kosovo and Metohija is so vitally, psychologically, spiritually and mystically important for each and every one of us.⁵¹

⁴⁷ See Radić and Vukomanović, “Religion and Democracy,” 188–190, 203.

⁴⁸ Artemije Radosavljević, *Kosovo i Vidovdan* (Eparhija Raškoprizrenska, 2007), 7, 12.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Filip Ejodus and Jelena Subotić, “Kosovo as Serbia’s Sacred Space,” in *Politicization of Religion, the Power of Symbolism*, eds. Gorana Ognjenović and J. Jozelić (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014), 169.

⁵⁰ Ejodus and Subotić, “Kosovo,” 170.

⁵¹ Ejodus and Subotić, “Kosovo,” 174.

Kosovo has therefore always been the most sensitive ecclesiastical, political and even “ontological” issue for the SOC. It is no wonder, then, that any bishop in charge of an eparchy in Kosovo assumes a distinct political role by his very jurisdiction. In the most recent period, Bishop Teodosije became known for his opposition to Serbian President Vučić’s proposal to negotiate ethnic demarcation lines between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. Teodosije’s major concern was that the majority of Serbs living south of the Ibar River would have to leave their homes and their most sacred temples and monasteries, such as Pećka patrijaršija (a former seat of the Serbian Patriarchate), Visoki Dečani, Gračanica and Prizren. This, in fact, would represent a new instance of displacement of the population in the Balkans based solely on their ethnicity. Because of this opposition, coming from the ranks of the Kosovo Orthodox prelates (Teodosije, Sava Janjić), in the summer of 2018 an unprecedented political and media campaign was launched against them by the Serbian government and the president of Serbia himself. Bishop Teodosije appealed to the authorities in Belgrade and Priština, and to representatives of the international community concerning “the politically and morally irresponsible statements of politicians” on both sides, who speak of the “final solution” in the context of the “territorial division” and “demarcation between Serbs and Albanians,” thereby resulting in anxiety in the local population. Teodosije asked if there existed individuals who would have the historical and moral “courage” to instigate the exodus and calamity of tens of thousands innocent people. The Bishop believes that such a principle, which led to the tragedy of many innocent people being killed during the wars of the 1990s, is a continual threat to peace and stability even beyond the Western Balkans. Thus, the solution for all issues in Kosovo and Metohija could and should only be sought in the pursuit of peace, security for all citizens, particularly the minority ethnic and religious communities, in preservation of their spiritual and cultural heritage, historical identity and human and religious freedoms. Teodosije emphasized that his appeal did not mean an invitation to a frozen conflict, because the SOC is against all conflicts: “This is an invitation to a responsible and transparent continuation of the dialogue within the framework of stability of the region and the European continent, and also in line with all the relevant international charters and standards, including the UN Resolution 1244.”⁵²

⁵² “Vladika Teodosije: Podela Kosova vodi iseljavanju Srba i stradanju baštine,” *Politika*, July 25, 2018, <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/407943/Vladika-Teodosije-Podela-Kosova-vodi-iseljavanju-Srba-i-stradanju-bastine>.

Lastly, in May 2019, President Vučić visited the Serbian prelates during the unofficial session of the Holy Council of Bishops and, on that occasion, he criticized Teodosije for “sabotaging,” as it were, his policies concerning Kosovo. It is interesting that Bishop Maksim later regretted not being present at this meeting, where he would have defended his brother Teodosije from the president’s criticism. However, an unusually anxious debate with Vučić included some other Orthodox prelates, such as Grigorije, Joanikije, Jovan (Ćulibrk) and the late Metropolitan Amfilohije.⁵³ It became clear, I think, that the opposition coming from the ranks of the more outspoken bishops within the SOC has been directed against both the Serbian presidency (government) and the Holy Synod, presided over by Patriarch Irinej, and heavily influenced by the Bishop of Bačka Irinej (Bulović). Interestingly enough, the issues of the Serbian state policy regarding Kosovo and the administration of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology have been at the core of this, as yet unresolved, dispute. It therefore seems that a certain correlation could be detected between the two burning issues that severely burden the SOC today. The new voices among the Orthodox theologians (heard both at the Council of Bishops and at the Faculty of Theology) have been blocked, to a certain extent, by the Church’s hierarchy. The hierarchy opted for cooperation with the Serbian government, and the younger clerics were targeted from both directions: by President Vučić and by Patriarch Irinej. The controversy regarding the status of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and the destiny of its proscribed professors thus appears as a litmus test for broader disagreements within the SOC, including the prospective solution of the Kosovo problem. The regular session of the Holy Council of Bishops, held in May 2021, was presided over, for the first time, by the new Serbian patriarch Porfirije. It was also an opportunity to settle at least some of the aspects of this unprecedented internal—both doctrinal and organizational—cleavage within the SOC.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me provide several additional comments regarding the question posed in the title of this article. In the SOC, the distinction between a liberal and a conservative wing has traditionally been tackled in relation to the election of a new patriarch, or concerning the possible visit of the pope to Ser-

⁵³ Jelena Tasić, “Vučić pretio vladikama poverljivim papirima,” *Danas*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/vucic-pretio-vladikama-poverljivim-papirima/>.

bia, whereby the bishops who are committed to ecumenism have usually been labeled as liberal. For example, when Patriarch Pavle was surprisingly elected in 1990, most of the commentators did not view him as a member of either a conservative or a liberal current. He was simply considered a modest monk who had spent most of his episcopate in Kosovo. On the other hand, his successor, Patriarch Irinej, was perceived, at least in some circles, as a moderate bishop. However, one should bear in mind that conservatism is the predominant feature in the SOC Sabor. The conservatives are openly against Serbia's accession to the EU and, hence criticize almost any political movement of this country towards the West. Accordingly, they are predominantly in favor of Russia and its Orthodox Church, and have pronounced eschatological and idealistic perceptions of Kosovo. In fact, one could probably speak of even three theological and ecclesiastical orientations in this context: Russian, Greek, and Serbian. The first significant post-World War II generation of Serbian bishops was educated in Athens. They were later appointed as professors at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology (Atanasije, Amfilohije, Irinej Bulović). Russian and Serbian schools are similar, especially concerning liturgical issues. Nonetheless, in their younger days, some of the "Greeks" turned out to be pro-Russian in their senior years (such as the case of the late Metropolitan Amfilohije).

Apart from their moderate, pro-European stance, which could probably be explained by these bishops' appointments in the Western diaspora, as the liberal current supports the modernization and gradual transformation of the Church, including a more independent, university- and not church-oriented, status of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology. The age of a bishop might be another indicator in this regard (for example, younger liberals and older conservatives), while another pointer is perhaps the region: Bosnian bishops are traditionally considered more conservative and even rightist in their political and ideological leanings. Finally, of no less importance are the former links of a bishop with the authorities in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina: Some of them were supporters of Milošević or Karadžić, whereas others were more in favor of the post-Milošević democratic governments.

As for the theologians who appealed against the creationist *Petition* in 2017, I would be inclined to place their liberalism in yet another context. Here, we speak of a predominantly younger generation of Serbian Orthodox professors of theology, mainly born in the 1970s and 1980s. I have already indicated that they intellectually came of age during the post-Milošević democratic period, which could have influenced their political and social upbringing. They are predominantly the millennials educated in modern schools, and at the post-2000 Uni-

versity of Belgrade. Darwin is part of their secular education, as Nikolaj and Justin are included in chapters in their theological curricula and literature. Some of them were active in the alternative educational projects (such as the regional peacebuilding and reconciliation programs of various CSOs) and, with their no small international experience, they are normally inclined towards ecumenical dialogue and tolerance. With the more pronounced, or at least tacit, support of bishops who predominantly serve in the Western diaspora, they do have all the necessary preconditions for nurturing their reformist and modernist outlooks in both theological and ecclesiastical matters. It remains open to see how deeply they are going to participate in the evolution of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the forthcoming decades.

