ECCLESIOLOGY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN
ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

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One of the most dangerous developments in the modern world is the rise of an excessive nationalistic movement, so dangerous for the stability of peace among the nations. The most recent developments in the Balkans, Middle East, and Africa, with their ethnic wars only strengthen the assumption of misconception of the sleeping and universal giant of nationalism. The rise of very dangerous nationalism in modern Europe might also be a very early sign for the international community to intensify the study of all the spectrums of this movement. The Eastern European nationalism, strengthened by religious awakening after years of persecution, is of special interest for the political analysts. Religion and nationality can form a combustible mixture, where religious and ethnic prejudices could erupt into bloody conflicts.

National identity in Eastern European countries or the Balkans has to be studied with special attention to the relation of the church and national identity. In those regions the old alliance between religion and politics, church and state, is reemerging with unpredictable consequences. In this particular development in the Balkans "the church is misused as inspiration for nationalism and political instrument in a conflict situation."¹ As a consequence, the church is being shamelessly used by the modern states in their own egoistic and conflicting interest. The co-existence of the church and nationality is not only a theoretical question, but it reaches to the very existence of human being. Because of this, the concept of orthodox ecclesiology and national identity is an exceedingly complex and unpleasantly sensitive topic for discussion. Difficulties are also derived from the fact that for Orthodox Christianity religion, national identity, culture, social and political life have been so deeply intertwined in the life of the church. Although it is a difficult theme for analysis, it is also extremely relevant in the development of today's world.

It is very important to emphasize in the introduction the fact that for the ecclesiology of the Orthodox Church the two terms, church and national identity, are to be in relation to each other to a certain degree,

The origin of these concepts is ideologically different and not adequately related to each other in principle. As it is going to be discussed in the first part of our presentation, there is between both of these terms a synthesis, which is being used to express certain correlations. The concept of ecclesiology of the church in the world will be discussed first, before discussing the subject of national identity and nationalism. The deformation of a specific balance between church and nation on behalf of nationalism creates a total inability from Orthodox ecclesiology to combine these concepts together. The fearful events in the former Yugoslavia are atrocious manifestations of the evil and destructive political ambitions where the church became a mere instrument to achieve the ultimate agenda. The problem of deformation of church existence by nationalism will be discussed in the second part of this presentation. The final outcome of our analysis will be presented at the very end of our paper, where “healthy nationalism” has a place in the perspective of Orthodox theology.

The Nature of the Church

According to the contemporary Orthodox ecclesiology, there is no one official definition of the nature of the church. The reality of the church is the experience of the people of God in the holy eucharist. Because of this specific character, church, in its foundation, is eucharistic and indefinite. Based on the fathers of the church, church tradition and the ecumenical councils, it is impossible to find the definition of the nature of church or systematic teaching of her mystical existence. Authentic ecclesiology of

2 According to Constantine Andronikof (Institut of Saint-Serge, Paris), a concept of nation, nationality and nationalism not only lacks precision in the ecclesial conscience, but the concept of nation doesn’t have the ontological entity either, look in: Kallistos Ware, “Catholicity and Nationalism: A Recent Debate at Athens.” Eastern Churches Review X (1978) 1-2, 15.

