

SERBIA: State Silent About Protestant Dialogue Offer On New Law

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 25 September 2001

More than a month after a meeting of Protestant Churches in Belgrade, Serbia's ministry of religion has failed to respond to the meeting's demands for a dialogue on the proposed new religion law that many Protestant Churches fear will infringe religious freedom. No ministry official has been prepared to discuss with Keston News Service why it has rejected the offer of dialogue made at the 23 August ecumenical meeting or what measures it will take to meet these concerns. Government representatives have already dismissed earlier criticism of the proposed new law, claiming it will maintain the 'highest principles of religious freedom achieved in Europe'.

Although the Serbian draft law on religious freedom has not yet been published, Vojislav Milovanovic, the Serbian religion minister, held a press conference in June to announce the main features of the new law (see KNS 17 July 2001). Six religious communities were singled out for mention in the law's preamble, an unusual feature for a law - the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Islamic Faith Community, the Jewish Religious Community, the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches - since they have been recognised as 'traditional' religious communities in Serbia. A new term was devised for all other religious communities - 'legal entities with religious aims'.

Because there is no existing law in Serbia regulating religious communities (the former law was abolished by parliament in 1993), the new law has been long expected. Following the political changes in Yugoslavia in the wake of the ousting of Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic and his socialist government last year, Serbian nationalist parties have been lobbying for more recognition for the predominant religious group, the Serbian Orthodox Church. Since the acting constitution does not recognise any religious community above any other, the new law - if adopted - would represent a change of status, creating a division between communities which are 'recognised', i.e. named in the law's preamble, and others which would need to reregister under the new regulations.

In the wake of Milovanovic's announcement, representatives of the Baptists, Adventists, Pentecostals, Churches of Christ, the Serbian Evangelical Alliance and the Belgrade Catholic Archdiocese met in Belgrade on 23 August. A statement after the meeting reported that 'an initiative was put forward for dialogue on the religious law' and that a formal complaint had been sent to the Serbian parliament, government, religion minister and the public at home and abroad.

However, contacted by Keston, the Catholic Archdiocese said it had not signed the proposed document. Although their representative attended the meeting, France Senk, secretary to the archdiocese, declared, Archbishop Stanislav Hocevar has not yet given formal approval of the initiative. 'The initiative is still in the preparatory phase,' he told Keston in Belgrade on 24 September. 'Since the whole document is not complete, and may not yet have reached the Archbishop, he cannot comment on it.'

Religious communities which have already signed the initiative expressed their deep concern over human rights and religious freedom issues, 'as well as the forthcoming regulations concerning religious freedom', declared the document, passed to Keston by the Seventh Day Adventists' Yugoslav headquarters in Belgrade. 'The inequitable position regarding denominations of "traditional" Churches and their "privileged" status, as compared to other religious bodies, seriously jeopardises the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution, equality of citizens, and anti-discrimination of any kind, including freedom of religion,' the statement complained.

The signatories asked the government to begin a dialogue on the religious legislation, complaining that none of them had been consulted about the proposals. 'We expect all religious denominations and communities to take an active part in promoting and passing the forthcoming legislation affirming complete religious freedom.'

'When the government issued an instruction on 24 July implementing religious education in the educational system in Serbia, stating that only traditional churches will have that right, and then naming the six denominations also listed in the draft law, it was obvious to me that we are becoming "second class" religious bodies,' complained Goran Zarubica, president of the Council of the Churches of Christ in Serbia. 'This situation is truly undermining the position of our denomination in the world, so we accepted the Adventists' invitation to attend this meeting.'

'We all came together to reach consensus,' Rev. Lazar Stojsic, Secretary General of the Serbian Evangelical Alliance, told Keston on 13 September in Belgrade. 'All the denominations present informed their international partners and headquarters, and we sent the initiative to the European Evangelical Alliance and the World Evangelical Fellowship. We have also received some local media coverage.'

'We sent our joint initiative to the government, parliament and the embassies of several Western countries, but so far we have received no response from any of them,' Miodrag Zivanovic of the Adventist Conference in Yugoslavia and the main organiser of the August meeting told Keston.

This initiative is the second attempt by Protestant churches to enter a dialogue with the government in the last month. An earlier public protest was issued as a 'warning to the domestic and international public' because, the organisers maintained, most of the legally registered religious communities fear their rights will be jeopardised by religious education in secular schools and by the proposed new religion law.

However, the religion ministry has dismissed Protestant concerns. 'The Law on Religious Freedom contains standards required by the candidate states for joining the European Union,' a 17 September press statement from the ministry asserted. 'This law will have constitutional importance in Serbia, because ... religious freedom and rights are basic human rights... It will also give special consideration to protection of citizens against criminalised religious sects.'

Keston's repeated attempts to gain a response from the Serbian religion ministry, including faxing a set of questions, were fruitless. (END)