

Recent Developments in Church-State Relations in Yugoslavia

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There has been a marked deterioration in church-state relations in Yugoslavia in the past year as a direct result of the illiberal domestic policy, pursued by the Tito regime since the sacking of the liberal communist party leadership in Croatia, the country's second largest republic, in December 1971. It is probably still too early to say whether this is merely a temporary setback, or the erosion of the unique and, on the whole, successful *modus vivendi* between the communist state and the Christian churches in Yugoslavia—especially the two biggest, the Serbian Orthodox and the Roman Catholic which, between them, account for two-thirds of the country's total population.¹ But the outlook is far from encouraging.

On the surface, there has been little or no change. Relations between the government and the Serbian Orthodox Church are correct, if not cordial. They were quite satisfactory immediately after the war—as far as that was possible within the framework of a militant communist regime—but became cooler in 1967 when the Serbian Orthodox Church refused to recognise the newly organized Macedonian Church, on the grounds that, to split off Macedonia from Serbia was a politically inspired act. The so-called Belgrade protocol—an agreement between Yugoslavia and the Vatican—which was signed in 1966, is also in force. That agreement, which took some 6 years to negotiate, permitted the Roman Catholic Church in Yugoslavia to re-open some of its seminaries, which had been closed since 1945, and to expand its publishing activity. In return the church was to accept the existing political system. Both the Vatican and the Tito regime seem anxious to preserve this agreement. The Vatican is probably hoping that the latter—the “Belgrade model”—will aid the negotiating of similar agreements with other east European communist regimes. The Tito government is clearly anxious to retain the Vatican's goodwill, an important consideration since Italy is Yugoslavia's second most important trading partner in the Common Market. More importantly, perhaps, the Yugoslav leaders do not want to drive the churches

¹ The population is just over 20 million. According to the 1953 census, 7,011,000, or 41.1 per cent of all Yugoslavs were Orthodox and 5,383,000, or 31.8 per cent, were Catholic. Most of the rest were Moslem. But about 1 million Macedonians now have to be subtracted from the Orthodox figure, because since 1967 the Macedonians have had their own Macedonian Orthodox Church, separate from the Serbian Orthodox Church.

into total opposition to the regime, where they could once again become spontaneous outlets for all political opposition to the communist state, as they became after the war. But the inner logic of its own repressive internal policy is driving the Tito regime towards open conflict with the churches.

The main reason for this trend is the regime's *de facto* repudiation of its former pluralist policy in the field of ideology. Now that the communist party is trying to reassert its former total ideological monopoly in society, all "alien" ideological influences, including religious influences, must be fought, especially among young people. Both churches, but especially the Roman Catholic Church, have made substantial gains among the young under the regime's more liberal policy of the 1960s, although no religious organisations for young people have been permitted even under the Belgrade protocol. But church reforms, associated with the Vatican council, and the general opening up of the Roman Catholic Church, have aroused much interest among young people, especially among students, in Croatia, Slovenia, and elsewhere, even to a certain extent among the Orthodox youth (a fact which has not helped dispel ecumenical suspicions in some Orthodox quarters). This revival of interest in religion has clearly worried the regime. According to Belgrade NIN, of 3 December, 1972, no less than 40 per cent of all students at a teacher training college in Split in Croatia were church-goers. Only 3 out of 500 students at that college were communist party members and many teachers are known to be believers and church-goers.

The Yugoslav regime's recent campaign against nationalism has also affected the churches. The Archbishop of Zagreb, Mgr. Kuharic, was sharply attacked in January 1972 for allegedly making nationalist remarks in his Christmas sermon. The main Catholic publication in Yugoslavia, the Zagreb fortnightly, *Glas Koncila* (circulation: 110,000) has also been attacked for its alleged support of Croat nationalism and liberalism. Its 22 October issue was banned last year, and proceedings are still pending against one of its main staff writers, Mr. Zivko Kustic. Another leading member of the *Glas Koncila* staff, Miss Smiljana Rendic, was sentenced by a court in Rijeka in January of this year to a year's imprisonment for writing an allegedly nationalist article in a non-religious magazine in 1971, comparing Croatia's status in Austria-Hungary and Yugoslavia. Several Catholic priests in Croatia and Bosnia-Hercegovina have been given stiff sentences for allegedly making nationalist statements or possessing nationalist literature.

But it has not been easy to establish the charge of nationalism against the Catholic Church. The Catholic hierarchy in Yugoslavia, and also

Croatia itself, while broadly supporting the federal reforms of the late 1960s and early 1970s, have, on the whole, kept their distance from the political ferment in Croatia during the period, 1969-71. Some bishops are even known to have been openly hostile to the reform movement, seeing in it perhaps a counterpart to their own troublesome reformers within the church. A few are even rumoured to have welcomed the introduction of the new repressive political course as a welcome opportunity to restore unity in Catholic ranks.

On the principle of equal treatment for all, the party has also been critical of the Orthodox Church for its alleged Serbian nationalism, treating as political meddling the Orthodox Church's occasional criticisms of the constitutional reforms in the period, 1969-71. An example of such meddling was the church's opposition to a secular mausoleum, to be built on Mount Lovcen in Montenegro. It was designed by a Croat sculptor and dedicated to the famous Montenegrin prince, bishop and poet, Njegos. Many church leaders saw it as a prelude to the organization of a separate Montenegrin church. Opposition to the Macedonian Church was also regarded by the regime as an example of the church's Serbian nationalism. However, no more than occasional attacks in the press have occurred. The only blatant act of persecution has been the imprisonment for 30 days of Bishop Vasilije of Zica in October 1972: he was alleged to have made nationalist and anti-regime remarks.

But both churches, and especially their laymen, are now being subjected to an increasing amount of petty harassment and chicanery: for example, pressure is put on parents not to send children to religious instruction; permits to build churches have been refused; politically unobjectionable Catholic documentary films have been banned. But the top leaders are clearly reluctant to allow a head-on conflict to develop, particularly as the communist party has still much to sort out in its own ranks. In February, Croatia's vice-premier, Mr. Rukavina, appealed against "arbitrary, irresponsible and crude interference with established religious rights guaranteed by the constitution, law and society". All in all, the position is still uncertain in what is clearly a transitional period in Yugoslavia's turbulent post-war history. If after President Tito's retirement or death, the present illiberal course is reversed, the churches will benefit immediately, and the present situation will be seen as just a temporary setback. Such a reversal is desired by many liberal communists, especially those who have worked to improve church-state relations over the years. But if, as is more likely, the present course continues, then the churches must expect more problems and difficulties.