

Church-State Relations in Yugoslavia since 1967

STELLA ALEXANDER

The history of relations between the two principal Christian Churches in Yugoslavia, the Catholic and the Orthodox, and the State since 1967, is one of rapid change. Relations eased markedly during the first five of these years. This was followed by a hardening of the State's attitude which was a reflexion of its attitudes over a wider political field.

The relaxation of tight Party control which had been growing slowly during the second half of the 1950s and the early part of the 1960s took a sharp spurt forwards after the fall of Rankovic in 1966. The change was most marked in the Catholic areas, in the western part of the country, especially in Croatia, because Rankovic was a Serb as well as a communist, and it coincided with the signing of the Protocol between the Yugoslav government and the Vatican.

It was at this time that local nationalisms, never far below the surface, began to manifest themselves more openly, in Macedonia, among the Albanians in southern Serbia, but particularly in Croatia and among Croats in Bosnia Hercegovina. It took the form, at first, of liberalizing tendencies which were shared in Croatia by the leaders of the League of Communists of Croatia, who enjoyed widespread popular support. The Croatian nation found itself in growing unity, and the Catholic Church found itself increasingly sharing in this unity. In Slovenia the old suspicions of clericalism were still present, but there was more reality in the separation of Party and government than in any other republic and remarkable freedom for the expression of divergent ideas. In Serbia the old guard of the Party was approaching retirement and new liberal men were coming in. The relations between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the government were strained by the Macedonian schism which finally took place in 1967 but this did not erupt into open conflict. The federal and Macedonian republican governments and the Macedonian clergy (which had already constituted the three Macedonian dioceses into a so-called "autonomous" Church separate from the Serbian Orthodox Church but under the jurisdiction of the Serbian Patriarch) were determined that the Macedonian Orthodox Church should become fully autocephalous but avoided as far as pos-

BWA, CEC, CPC and regional religious organizations in many countries are developing and strengthening with every coming year.

As far as Africa is concerned, many churchmen from Madagascar, the Camerons, Liberia and other countries have visited our churches. Our churches in big cities are often visited by students from African countries. There is a girl-student from the Republic of Chad, who is a member of the Moscow Baptist Church. She has become a believer in Moscow and there she was baptized.

The Church of ECB in the Soviet Union bears its witness to Christ as Saviour and Reconciler paying special attention to the spiritual growth of its members into a deeper knowledge of

Jesus Christ, reflecting His teaching in everyday life as the True Light Which enlightens everyone who comes to Christ.

The religious and peace activities of the All-Union Council of the Evangelical Christians and Baptists in the USSR received unanimous approval by the regular 1974 Congress of the AUCECB which had as its motto "The unity of Spirit in the bond of Peace" (Eph. 4:3). Some 1,000 delegates and guests including 22 from foreign religious organizations, took part in the Congress.

Respectfully,

A. BYCHKOV
I. ORLOV

A. STOYAN
V. KULIKOV

A Prayer from Sheffield Cathedral (U.K.)

Let us pray for our Christian brethren in communist lands.

O God by whom all governments exercise authority, and who hast called Thy church to serve Thee in this present world, we pray for our brethren in those countries where freedom of worship is restricted or denied, we pray for those parents who are hindered and obstructed in teaching the faith of Christ to their children. We pray for all who are persecuted for the confession of Thy Son our Saviour, especially for those who are imprisoned and subject to torture and ill-treatment. Bless, we beseech Thee, O Lord, our Roman Catholic and Orthodox brethren. Guide and inspire their leaders, strengthen and support their witness and to our persecuted Baptist brethren grant the special blessings of Thine encouragement. We pray for the national and political leaders in all communist lands and for those who shape public opinion that they may be moved from hardness of heart by the truth of the gospel of Christ, and this we ask in His name, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, even Christ our Saviour.

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HAYMAN JOHNSON

sible any open humiliation of the Serbian Orthodox Church; and the Serbian Synod did not take the final step of excommunicating the break-away hierarchy.

After Tito's speech at Karageorgevo in December 1971 the atmosphere changed. The replacement of the liberal leadership both at the centre and in the republics was followed by a renewal of attacks on the Churches both for excessive nationalism and for exceeding their constitutional rights to concern themselves with "religious affairs". These began to be much more narrowly defined. There has been since then constant sniping at the Churches and attacks on individual Church leaders but there has not been any all-out attack on religious belief, and indeed there is constant reiteration of the constitutional and legal right to religious belief. The Churches have not suffered more than other sections of society. Relations with leaders of the religious communities are correct and relations with the Vatican continue to be good. This briefly, is the general picture today. To particularize it is necessary to return to 1967.

The Government and the Authorities

The tone of this period was set at a special session of the Executive Committee of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Croatia early in 1967, which discussed questions of religion, and the activity of the Catholic Church. They condemned on the one hand "bureaucratic elements in society" which endangered the unity of society by attacking sections of the population (i.e. believers) and on the other hand they condemned "political meddling" by the Churches in the work of social organizations, and encouraged individual believers to work within the Socialist Alliance; and they reminded the Socialist Alliance that the majority of its members were believers. They reviewed the changes in the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council, they praised John XXIII as a humanist and reformer, and the positive role which Paul VI was playing in world affairs, and they hoped that the signing of the Protocol would hasten the modernization of the Church in Yugoslavia and the "privatisation" of religion. They welcomed the dialogue, which was just beginning, between Christians and Marxists and the growing friendly contacts between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. This generally benevolent attitude was echoed in Slovenia, where Stane Kavcic, the Party leader, wrote that the chapters on human society in the Council documents would do credit to many central committees.

This attitude of the highest Party authorities set the tone of relations between the State and the Catholic Church for the next five years. But the discussion at this session of the Party also exposed a dilemma which has never been satisfactorily resolved and which in a different setting still exists today: the Party approved of the Vatican's new attitude to world

affairs and wanted believers to behave like full participating citizens and self-managers, but they wanted the Church as an institution to keep out of politics, particularly Yugoslav internal politics, except when it was convenient for the government to have the public support of the Church; and they were very nervous of even informal social activities of the Church and the clergy. In practice any pronouncement from the Churches on social or political affairs, no matter how relevant to the Churches, is apt to be interpreted as unwarranted interference, either by the press or by some official body.

The practice of self-management socialism was developing strongly at this time and great emphasis was laid upon it; there seemed to be real possibilities for individuals who were known to be believers to take part in the political and social life of the community—although as always in Yugoslavia there was much variation from place to place and from republic to republic, and, especially at grass-roots level, there were always the old-fashioned hard-liners who automatically reacted against the Churches and any manifestation of religious freedom. There were many individuals among the authorities who genuinely wanted individual believers to find a channel for political activity through the Socialist Alliance so that they would have no need to politicize the Church; there was even discussion about whether believers could be members of the League of Communists.

But this development of liberal attitudes and toleration towards religion were, in Croatia particularly, accompanied by a growth of nationalism and a desire to throw off anything which looked like control from the centre, which was identified with Serbian control. An experienced observer might already have detected signs of coming trouble in 1970.

During these years there was much discussion about the social activities of priests among the faithful. The Socialist Alliance recognized that the priests were filling a social need and were most active where the social organizations were weakest. They urged their members to include priests and believers in their activities so that they could fulfil their civil and political rights within the Socialist Alliance and not in the Church. It was constantly re-stated that religious belief must not be fought head-on with militant atheism but with Marxist humanism. But at the same time the old conditioned reflexes kept appearing and there was always the deep fear of the explosive conjunction of religion and nationalism.

The position of teachers who were believers, a delicate matter which had been side-stepped for years, was now discussed officially. It was becoming increasingly common for teachers to go to church, quietly but openly, especially in the larger towns. At the highest theoretical level, this was given guarded approval. But at the same time the Marxist upbringing of children and the best methods for this were always emphasized.

There was a lively dialogue at this time between Catholics and Marxists. It was restricted to a comparatively small number on either side but they

were all well-known figures in the academic world and in the Catholic Church. The first dialogue took place in March 1967 when Dr. Bosnjak the Zagreb philosopher and Dr. Mijo Skvorc, a Jesuit who is now auxiliary bishop of Zagreb met at the Student Centre. There were two and a half thousand students crowded into the main hall and there was an overflow meeting. After some tentative sparring the two distinguished speakers, both experienced polemicists, changed gear and made a real attempt to understand each other and make their audience understand what the other was getting at; each was careful not to humiliate the other or score cheap verbal points. Both Catholics and Marxists took part in the Paulus-gesellschaft dialogues held in Vienna.

At the same time religion in its philosophical and sociological aspects became rather fashionable. There was a Centre for the Study of Religion at the University of Ljubljana. An Institute for the Study of Atheism and Religion at the University of Zagreb was opened in 1968. Distinguished professors and younger scholars from universities all over the country took part in conferences and seminars and published their proceedings. They were joined occasionally by priests. There were even instances of university professors lecturing at theological faculties and extending invitations to professors at the theological faculties to lecture at the university. Dr. Cimic in his book *Socialist Society and Religion (Socialisticka Društva i Religija)* made the first full-length examination of the subject in a closely argued work based on Marxist premises but showing a sympathetic understanding of religion.

The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church, particularly in Croatia, where it was strong in intellectuals, took full advantage of the opportunities which were thrown open to it. Archbishop Seper of Zagreb was appointed Cardinal in 1965. His leadership was vigorous, but at the same time he remained on good terms with the Croatian authorities and there were no serious conflicts with the State.

In 1966 he authorized the establishment of Contemporary Christianity (Krscanska Sadasnjost) a Catholic centre to study and make known the thinking of Vatican II, in Zagreb. It supports itself by producing missals and liturgical books and has a remarkable production of journals and pamphlets: *Svesci (Notebooks)*, a theological journal; *Kana*, an illustrated family monthly magazine in colour; *AKSA*, a weekly Catholic news service which reports every mention of religion in the Yugoslav press besides reporting religious events and surveying the position of Churches all over the world; and many pamphlets and books.

The group of Catholic intellectuals, nearly all priests, who run these, all took part in the dialogue with Marxists and helped expound the ideas of

the Vatican Council. It was never a very large group but it had access to the most popular and influential religious publications (there was a great proliferation of these at this period), and they had close links with some progressive Marxist scholars. Neither group was popular with its respective establishment, but both sides were restrained by a mutual need not to give a handle to the hard-line communists, although the Catholic scholars did not feel much inhibition about the opinions of conservatives in the hierarchy or otherwise in positions of influence, and there were some lively polemics on both sides within the Church.

At a more popular level and also at government level the atmosphere steadily improved. Tito and Mika Spiljak the President of the Federal Executive Council both called on the Pope when they visited Rome. During this period came the canonization of Nikola Tavelic the first Croatian saint, which was greeted with enthusiasm by Croatian Catholics. About 50,000 people took part in a pilgrimage to Rome; it says much for the mutual confidence of the Church and the government that no obstacles were put in the way of the pilgrimage, that it did not result in excessive manifestations of Croatian nationalism in Rome and that the pilgrims all returned. The success of this occasion encouraged the authorities not to put any obstacles in the way of holding an international Mariological and Marian Congress in Zagreb in August 1970 but on the contrary to give it every cooperation. The republican government sent representatives to the airport to welcome the distinguished visitors to the Mariological Congress, including Cardinal Seper and Cardinal Suenens, gave a civic reception for them and were present at the reception at the Archbishopric. There was a pilgrimage on foot from Zagreb to the national shrine of Marija Bistrica, 30 kilometres from Zagreb, in the blazing August sun, and the authorities provided standpipes to supply the pilgrims with water and made admirable traffic arrangements to help them.

Diplomatic relations with the Vatican were restored after the signing of the Protocol. The Pro-Nuncio, Mgr. Mario Cagna, plays an important and altogether benevolent role. He is moderate and tactful, but also a realist and sensitive to the complications and subtleties of the situation in Yugoslavia; and because he has established a relationship of mutual respect and confidence with the government he is listened to.

It was also at this period that the Orthodox and Catholic Churches made official gestures of friendship towards each other at the highest level. Cardinal Seper took the occasion of his departure to Rome in 1967 to take up his new appointment, to pay farewell calls both on the Orthodox Metropolitan of Zagreb and on the Patriarch at his summer residence in Sremski Karlovci. There was also a certain amount of friendly exchange at lower levels and in some dioceses the Catholic and Orthodox bishops were close. But one has to record that this *rapprochement* is not very popular among many ordinary believers, many of whom still nurse historic suspicions and

the wounds of the war. The authorities encourage these friendly relations : representatives of the Commission for Religious Affairs and representatives of the different faiths, Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim are present at all official Church occasions – the consecration of bishops, the opening of a new church and so forth. There are innumerable examples of this, and in the changed climate of the last three years it is pleasant to be able to report that this at least has not changed.

The Serbian Orthodox Church

There was no equivalent outburst of intellectual ferment in the Serbian Orthodox Church during this period, and its relations with the government were overshadowed by the conflict over the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Orthodox thinking remained conservative and any overt progressive thinking seemed to be confined to members of the Orthodox Priests' Association, a body which enjoys government approval. The Church remained preoccupied with its internal problems. When the Patriarch and members of the Synod called on Mika Spiljak in March 1968 the questions they discussed were ones which had preoccupied the Church for a long time and it seemed that very little had changed. The Serbian Orthodox Church, it is true, had always found it more difficult to resist local pressures against the religious instruction of children and church attendance than the Catholic Church, and there were only two dioceses, Belgrade and Backa, where every parish had classes for religious instruction. But there had been during this period a great burst of church-building and repairing, especially in the small towns and villages. In spite of the complaints the official history of the Serbian Orthodox Church makes this quite clear. A lot of the money for this came from Serbian emigrants who had made good in America and Australia. But there were difficulties about building in some of the new suburbs and new towns, and the Serbian Orthodox Church is less flexible than the Catholics in using, for example "house churches".

The conflict over the Macedonian dioceses continued to throw its shadow over relations between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the government. The three Macedonian dioceses had managed, after much effort over many years, to break away from the Belgrade Patriarchate, at first partially in 1958 when they became autonomous as the Macedonian Orthodox Church but still acknowledged the Serbian Patriarch as their head, and finally in 1967 when the Church declared its own autocephaly with every encouragement and assistance from both the federal and Macedonian republican governments. The authorities considered that an independent Macedonian Church would help to strengthen Macedonian national identity and counter Bulgarian expansionism – and also, it must be said, Serbian hegemonism. At the beginning of the period we are dis-

cussing the Macedonian Orthodox Church was busy trying to establish its canonical validity: a seminary was established and further bishops consecrated to form a synod of a metropolitan and four bishops, one of whom had an overseas diocese for Macedonian emigrants in Australia and the United States. They have had a good deal of government financial help – they now have a large new building in the centre of Skopje to house the Metropolitanate and are building a new cathedral in the centre of Skopje. They have been less successful in establishing links with other Orthodox Churches and although there were visits both to and from the Bulgarian, Romanian and Russian Churches, and bishops and priests have been received by the Ecumenical Patriarch, no Orthodox Church has so far recognized the Macedonian Orthodox Church as autocephalous. However, there has not been any official excommunication of the bishops by the Serbian Orthodox Church, the priests and laity are still in touch, and Macedonian ordinands are sent to the Belgrade theological faculty for further training. It is a safe guess that eventually it will be accepted by other Orthodox Churches, as the Bulgarian and Greek Churches were.

In 1972 there was no sudden dramatic change, but the Party slowly and increasingly re-asserted its control, purged liberals in government and Party positions and more recently purged philosophers and sociologists in the universities. There is now altogether a much tighter, harder atmosphere all over Yugoslavia. But there has been no all-out attack on religion as such: one could cite dozens of examples of the reiteration of the basic legal and constitutional attitudes towards religion and the Churches, almost as though the authorities were warning their own people not to forget themselves. There have again been trials of priests, including Catholics, but they were charged with nationalism or with bringing prohibited political matter into the country. The Serbian Orthodox Church has been sharply attacked for chauvinism and Great Serbianism, and was very shocked when Bishop Vasilije of Zica was imprisoned for a month in 1972 for an indiscreet sermon – the first bishop to be sentenced to prison for many years.

There is certainly more administrative repression of various sorts than in the immediately preceding years. Pressure is put on parents not to give their children religious instruction, there are difficulties for people going to church openly and so forth. In 1973, *Delo*, the Slovenian daily, admitted that there were excesses against the Churches in small places. The bishops issued a long letter in October 1973 and among other points complained that difficulties are still put in the way of regular religious instruction. Some bishops have publicly asked to be informed by people who have experienced these pressures so that they can complain officially – an indication both that the pressures exist and that some bishops are prepared to make a public stand about it in their own dioceses. The Catholic press has been attacked, particularly *Glas Koncila* and *Druzina* (the Slovenian paper),

which have the widest circulation. At present the editor of *Glas Koncila* is forbidden to write – but not to edit the paper – and the offices of *Druzina* were raided, émigré pamphlets were removed and the editors accused of financial irregularities.

The areas which have come under the most overt pressure are education – the right of teachers to be practising believers – and the social activities of priests which fall outside strictly religious and liturgical functions. Both of these have been controversial matters for many years, although a tendency towards a more liberal attitude had been growing. After 1971 the question was dealt with much more generally and the grounds for objection restated in a different form. A Croatia literary magazine, *Tlo*, for instance, wrote: "It is a mistake to put the question – can a practising believer in a socialist society be an educator of the younger generation? The essential is that education should be founded on Marxism and anyone who cannot do this should seek other, less delicate work." The concept of ideologically neutral schools which had been bandied about earlier was now rejected, and in March 1974 at the 7th Congress of the Croatian League of Communists it was stated that the religious beliefs of teachers cannot be regarded as a private matter.

There are many references to the need to make the teaching of Marxism less mechanical and more lively: an article in *Skolske Novine* (*School News*) argued that Marxism must not be taught simply as a catechism, a sort of religion of Marx and Engels – it is a scientific point of view. The old Partisan leader Rodoljub Colakovic in an article in *NIN* opposed what he called "red catechists".

It has always been acknowledged that the Churches are most successful where the Party and the Socialist Alliance are weak and inactive. But why should it be left to priests, it is asked, to organize football games, excursions, choirs and so forth? Whereas before 1972, this continued with exhortations to members of the Party to do better, now, as well as the exhortations, there have been instances of repression which have found their way into the press – and presumably there were even more which did not. The question of whether such activities should be prohibited by law is being discussed.

It is now clear that these were advance warnings of the much more strictly defined legal framework for the Churches which is now being discussed. All the republics have been considering the drafts of new laws about the legal status of religious communities for over a year, and Yugoslav press reports suggest that the draft laws will shortly come before the republican legislatures. The draft Slovene law is the most fully reported, and if it is passed in the terms which are now suggested it will curtail very sharply some of the activities of the Catholic Church. It is proposed that the Church should be forbidden to deal with: (a) elementary, secondary and high school education (the Church does not do this formally, but it

has arranged out of school coaching for pupils who need it; it is not clear whether this would be stopped) (b) the protection of children and pre-school education (this would close down crèches for children of working mothers and might affect girls under the age of 15 who live as "novices" in convents and go to state schools until they have finished their compulsory education); (c) various cultural activities, social and health protection (this seems to refer to the social insurance of the clergy which for some time has been undertaken by the state system); (d) communal and economic activities. Furthermore both parents, rather than one, must now give their consent for a child under 15 to have religious instruction. On the other hand students in seminaries are now to have all the privileges which students in state schools have.

In earlier discussions about the law in the Vojvodina it was reported that the prohibition against employing believers as teachers was being considered. Indeed in Sombor and Subotica the local authorities jumped the gun and decided that teachers who were not in line with the Party "religiously, nationally or who have bourgeois attitudes" could not be kept on. A number have already lost their jobs. The latest report does not mention this but concentrates on a narrow definition of "religious affairs" (*verski poslovi*) and makes it clear that no social activities will be tolerated.

In Serbia it appears that limits will be very strict and one press report has the ominous phrase that anything which is not specifically allowed will be considered prohibited. In particular the religious press will only be distributed through the Churches or by subscription. In contrast, the Slovenian law explicitly allows the religious press to be distributed like the secular press. (It is not clear whether the enterprises running news kiosks will accept the religious press or not – so far they have not done so.)

The draft Macedonian law at one point stipulated that it should be illegal to give religious instruction to anyone under the age of 18 (or 15, stated other reports) but there was an immediate outburst of protests and the latest reports seem to indicate that this has been dropped. There were special reasons for this provision which was aimed at the Muslims: in villages and small towns they have increasingly, it seems, tended to withdraw their children, especially the girls, from school after the first four years, but to continue their religious instruction in regular establishments for this purpose.

These draft laws, if they are passed, will be probably the greatest setback to the integration of the Churches into the developing life of Yugoslavia that we have recently seen. Most favourably interpreted they seem to be designed to do just this, and to open the road for individual believers to participate in general social activities through the Socialist Alliance. In the discussion in Slovenia it was stated that organized charitable activity is a matter of general social importance and so the Church must not set up parallel structures but must participate in the general social activities of

the community. Furthermore, the desirability of such involvement was underlined. But will individual priests and nuns be able to do this, will they be treated like any other citizen? Already in 1970, the question of whether the Church should set up parallel structures was being debated, and the Religious Commission in Croatia was urging the Church to participate directly. The conditions for doing so are probably less favourable today than they were then. One could mention also the vigorous economic activity of the women's Orthodox monastery at Ljubostina where Mother Varvara has set up workshops for weaving and rug-making which help to support the monastery. Will this be considered forbidden economic activity? Candle-making, of course, is allowed and is a major element in the Serbian Orthodox Church's finances.

Nevertheless, I still do not believe that this legislation, restricting although it will undoubtedly be, or the other events I have been discussing should be looked at as an all-out attack on religion and the Churches. Compared with 1945-1955 these developments are mild and the context is quite different. Moreover, the Churches defend themselves vigorously and intelligently. On the other hand, one has the impression that the Churches seem to be affected by the general sense of flatness, the feeling that this is the moment to sit tight and keep quiet, the desire not to look for trouble when the surrounding political atmosphere is so uncertain.

What the immediate future – i.e. the next three or four years – holds for the Churches in Yugoslavia is as uncertain as what lies in wait for Yugoslavia itself. One can only be certain that it will be closely affected by the future of nationalities in Yugoslavia and the relations of these nationalities with each other.

Keston Lecture No. 1

MIKHAIL AGURSKY, recent émigré from the
Soviet Union, will speak on :

“Atheist Propaganda in the USSR”

on 30 April at 7.30 p.m. at Keston College.