

Comment

Church-State Relations in Yugoslavia

Vladimir Pavlinic, formerly the editor-in-chief of Glas Koncila (1963-1973), has written the following comment on Stella Alexander's article, "Church-State Relations in Yugoslavia since 1967", RCL Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring 1976, pp. 18-27.

The article by Stella Alexander, "Church-State Relations in Yugoslavia since 1967" is the most competent and objectively written account of this subject by a foreign author which I have so far seen. Analyses of this kind from foreign observers very often betray their sources. Such observers either use propagandists for the Yugoslav regime as their source or Church sources, which because of their nature cannot be objective. This article reflects, down to the smallest detail, a long and solidly based study of sources and documents, not a superficial dependence on the statements – usually tendentious – of the people whom it is discussing.

Nevertheless, in such a short account, dealing with a stormy and very complex period of political development in Yugoslavia, many things may remain unclear to the uninitiated foreign reader. This is the more likely since Yugoslavia is particularly difficult to understand from every point of view.

The present Yugoslav government has so far been unsuccessful in establishing a united country. It is impossible to give a generalized account of the whole territory of Yugoslavia. For example, it can be said that in one part of Yugoslavia relative religious freedom exists, or is developing, whereas in another part the actual situation and the trends might be quite the opposite. This difficulty emerges in Mrs. Alexander's article. Some developments are not described sufficiently precisely in their context; but it would have been virtually impossible to do so in such a short survey. Nevertheless she has clearly identified the differences in the circumstances of the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches. She might perhaps have gone further and underlined the differences between the

three Catholic regions – Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina – and the differences between the two Orthodox Churches, the Serbian and the Macedonian.

I should like to turn to a few points in the article. In the introductory section it is stated that “relations with the leaders of the religious communities are correct and relations with the Vatican continue to be good”. This is true of relations with the leaders of the religious communities on the official level, but it should also be noted that the official press, which today is again strictly controlled, has published several strong attacks on Archbishop Franjo Kuharic of Zagreb, President of the Bishops’ Conference, during the course of the last year. This sort of attack in practice is a signal to hardliners that the brakes are off in their relations with the lower clergy and the rank and file of believers. It is a sign of worsening conditions, in Croatia particularly, which suffered the most, especially on the political level, after the well-known speech by Tito at Karadjordjevo in December 1971. This speech was little reported in the foreign press, and if at all then inaccurately, under the influence of Belgrade centres of propaganda.

Next, it is true that diplomatic relations with the Vatican have not experienced any setback. But the Pronuncio in Belgrade, Mgr. Cagna, has certainly not been silent about the new restrictions on religious freedom in Yugoslavia, which Mrs. Alexander accurately describes. These interventions by Mgr. Cagna appear to have been largely unsuccessful. This indicates what in diplomatic language is called a “cooling” or a “hardening” of relations. The latest news, reported by the Belgrade correspondent of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 28 May, confirms this: the Vatican has refused an *agrément* to the newly-appointed Yugoslav Ambassador to the Holy See, giving as its reason that he is a person of “moral doubtfulness”. But observers in Belgrade interpret this action by the Vatican as a warning signal about the recent worsening of relations between the State and the Roman Catholic Church in Yugoslavia.

Discussions about the Protocol signed between the Holy See and the government in Belgrade do not usually mention the fact that this was done over the heads of the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia, entirely at government level. The bishops of Yugoslavia were simply handed the document about which they had not even been consulted. In fact there is one clause in the document which is deeply offensive to the Catholic clergy of the country, i.e. the paragraph concerning the “terrorist activities of priests”. Mrs. Alexander draws attention to a fact which analysts of the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia forget: the Protocol not only marked the beginning of improved relations between the Church and the State; it was also the product of relations which were already improving and an affirmation of them.

Mrs. Alexander, we hope, will make a wider analysis of this very im-

portant period in the life of the Church in Yugoslavia. There is probably no one better qualified than she, for in Yugoslavia itself nobody for a long time has had either the possibility or the freedom to undertake such a task. I should like to suggest to her that she pay special attention to the specific problem of the links between nationalism and religion in Yugoslavia. When Mrs. Alexander states (pp. 22-23) that Croatian Catholics and Orthodox Serbs "still nurse historic suspicions and the wounds of the war" it should be underlined that the history of these "suspicions and wounds" did not begin in the Second World War. They have a history of at least a hundred years, and became particularly sharp immediately after the creation of the first Yugoslavia in 1918 when the Serbian Orthodox Church was the official state Church and when to advance in government a person had to belong (by conversion if necessary) to the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Mrs. Alexander notes the particular sensitivity of the Yugoslav communist authorities to any social activity of the Church. In fact, after 1967 the Catholic Church in Croatia made the greatest strides in this field. This was thanks to its far-sighted policy of "small steps" on the one hand, and to the fact that the liberalization of political life in general began in Croatia and was carried further there than anywhere else on the other. When the regime suggests that social (charitable) activity should be carried out exclusively through the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Yugoslavia, one must remember that the Socialist Alliance is not an independent party or movement. It is an organization under the direct leadership and control of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia and therefore one of the instruments of the Party's absolutist rule. (All officials of the Alliance, even at the lowest level, must be members of the Party.*) The reservations of the Church in the face of such suggestions and recommendations are understandable.

The communists consider the social activities of the Church to be its strongest means of propaganda to "win over" people, and it is quite normal that a totalitarian regime should not wish to share power and influence in society with anyone else. All talk of "parallel structures" is simply a mask for a real fear: that in a very sensitive social area a "reactionary" institution might score more highly than "the most socialist" government in the world.

VLADIMIR PAVLINIC

* This is confirmed in a recent interview with Juro Bilic, a leading member of the League of Communists in Croatia, published in *Vjesnik* (Zagreb) on 31 May. There are, he said, representatives in the Socialist Alliance of bourgeois groups, private artisans and other professions, priests, etc. Virtually none are in the leadership of the Socialist Alliance and the same is true of the youth organization. He deplores this, not only for the sake of those who are unrepresented, but because it gives rise to opportunism and the unchecked use of power among the leadership.