

COMMUNIST AREA

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GROWING TENSION IN RELATIONS BETWEEN STATE
AND CHURCHES IN YUGOSLAVIA

Summary: In the past year, a degree of deterioration has occurred in the relations between the Yugoslav state and the two major religious communities, the Roman Catholic and Serbian Orthodox. Increased anti-religious propaganda in the regime press has been observed, and most recently there have been attacks and legal measures against bishops. Both the Serbian Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church are accused of nationalism. On the other hand, the regime is apparently afraid that the religious communities, while defending religious liberties in the present situation, may also become defenders of constitutional and individual rights.

Relations between the state and the religious communities in Yugoslavia have recently undergone a period of serious trials. Persistent and increasing criticism of religious and church activity in the press, trials of priests and a ban on religious publications have borne witness to an obvious deterioration of relations between the party and state authority and the religious communities in Yugoslavia.

This is particularly true of the state's relations with the two largest religious communities in Yugoslavia, the Catholic and Orthodox churches. (1) Communist party representatives from all Yugoslav republics and provinces, summoned recently in Zagreb to discuss religion, clericalism, youth problems and the pertinent tasks of party members, warned the party organizations and public opinion "against political activity by the Catholic and Orthodox churches in Yugoslavia." (2) Croatian party CC member and leading Yugoslav party theoretician Stipe Puras (shaw-war) told the meeting that especially within the Catholic and Orthodox churches, "there had been serious incidents of a political nature." (3) The next day, from another part of Yugoslavia, the Serbian province of Vojvodina, an almost identical tone was heard. A report issued by the provincial conference of the Socialist Alliance of Vojvodina noted that "an ever-greater incursion of the church into the province's political life has been evidenced." (4) Inter-national relations, which are otherwise very good, "are the way area the church is deliberately infiltrating," the report stated.

These and other similar statements were preceded by several incidents during the past few months. In April 1955, the Archbishop of Zagreb, Dr. Franjo Kuharić (ku-har-eech) was sharply criticized in the press for his alleged "violation of the sacred and natural limits of the church and religious activity in sermons and sermons." (5) Shortly thereafter, Lucijan Krizanović (kriz-ah-eech) was sentenced to 30 days' imprisonment for having publicly expressed sharp criticism against the educational and youth policy currently pursued in the republic of Serbia. (6) Finally, in October this year, the largest Catholic fortnightly, Glas koncila, published by the Archbishopric of Zagreb was banned. (7) The paper was incriminated for "luring believers to disobedience and disrespect of the Constitution and laws in Yugoslavia and Croatia." The ban of Glas koncila was the first in the eleven-year history of this respected Catholic paper.

Growing Religious Activity

What is the reason for the sudden deterioration of church-state relations in Yugoslavia? This question appears to be justified, since the church-state relations in Yugoslavia were developing very satisfactorily in past years for both the state and the church. This is particularly true as far as relations with the Catholic Church are concerned.

After the agreement between Yugoslavia and the Holy See was signed in June 1954, the activity of the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia had been developing in a relaxed atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect. Not infrequently did high Catholic prelates express their loyalty to the Yugoslav state and Yugoslav system. The Archbishop of Split, Mgr. Franjo Štampar (sh-ah-nich), stated in an interview that "the self-management system could also be considered as a Christian ideal." (8)

The communist officials similarly expressed their satisfaction with the development of relations with the Catholic Church following the 1960 Belgrade agreement. Dr. Ante Piamengo, a Croatian party theoretician said in an article that "the socialist community, while opposing the Church as a political institution, respects its involvement in dealing with problems of war and peace, racial conflicts, famines, etc."⁽⁸⁾ He added that the activity of the Catholic Church on the international level in dealing with important world problems can be welcomed." In Yugoslav conditions, he said, "special importance should be attached to the activity of the church in dealing with the inter-national relationship."⁽⁹⁾ Several party documents stressing the same policy were issued during the years that followed. As a result of this spirit of tolerance and mutual respect, the tension between the state and the Catholic Church which existed in the immediate post-war period has been gradually reduced. The activity of the Catholic Church increased considerably, while the state, as stipulated in the 1960 Belgrade agreement, provided for non-interference of the Church in political life.

Similar relations developed between the state and Yugoslavia's largest religious community, the Serbian Orthodox Church. Although numerically the strongest religious group in Yugoslavia, the Serbian Church falls clearly behind the Roman Catholic Church as far as activity, religious education and general influence are concerned. There are, however, serious historical reasons for the present position of Serbian Orthodoxy in Yugoslav society. Certainly the most important is the fact that as a consequence of the war-time persecutions, involvement in the civil war and post-war emigration of priests, the number of Orthodox clergy in Yugoslavia was reduced to just about one half of its pre-war strength. The Orthodox Church also suffered tremendous material losses during the war and under the communist regime as well. The greatest part of its property has been nationalized.

Due to its weakened position in the country, and failing the international backing that the Catholic Church has enjoyed, the Serbian Orthodox Church was obliged to adopt careful tactics in its religious activity as well as in its relations toward the state. Nonetheless, the more liberal religious policy implemented by the Yugoslav authorities since the early sixties, and the 1965 agreement signed by the Yugoslav government and the Vatican regulating relations with the Catholic Church also indirectly benefited the Serbian Orthodox Church. In the last few years, its activity has increased considerably not only within the strictly religious sphere, but also in publishing and other social activities.

Churches Accused of Nationalism

The growing activities of both the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Church have been followed carefully and with obvious suspicion by the communist party and state apparatus. The communist suspicion and nervousness has become particularly evident since last year's inner-party struggle and increased nationalistic agitation culminated in the ouster of the Croatian party leadership in December, and since the introduction of increased control over the press and other mass media in the country.

The communist servileness could easily be explained for two reasons. The first was the fear that churches, the Roman Catholic as predominantly Croat, and the Orthodox as predominantly Serb, may become a potential ally of Yugoslavia's growing nationalism. The second reason was the suspicion that the churches, while defending the religious rights of individuals, would become an open defender of constitutional and individual rights.

These two suspicions that the Yugoslav communists harbor toward both the Roman Catholic and Serbian Orthodox church have been mirrored in the Yugoslav press, which frequently accuses both churches of alleged "nationalistic propaganda" and of "interference into non-religious affairs." Concurrently, since the beginning of 1971 an increase in anti-church propaganda has become apparent. The Serbian Church has been increasingly accused of exploiting Serbian nationalistic feeling for Church purposes. According to a report by Vukobje Balacevic, the secretary for information of the Serbian government, there were 40 religious publications in Serbia at the beginning of 1973. He admitted that there were few cases in which these organs conflicted with the existing legislation (sic!). However, he spoke of witnessing "an ever-greater involvement of religious groups and individuals in a nationalistic and chauvinistic policy." (11) Such accusations became more directly formulated in the months that followed the Croatian crisis in December 1971 and the subsequent anti-nationalistic campaign. In October 1972, on the eve of the Serbian crisis, the Belgrade weekly Ein accused the Serbian Orthodox Church of propagating racism and great-Serbian nationalism, and of collaborating with the war-time people's army. (12) Even Patriarch German of the Serbian Church was attacked in this connection for having "anathematized the [separated] Macedonian Orthodox Church," and for having treated "Macedonian people as an ethnic group."

No less violent was the criticism directed against the alleged non-religious activity of the Catholic Church and against the Archbishop of Zagreb, Mgr. Franjo Kuharic (ku-ha-reeh). In this case also, amid the anti-nationalistic campaign at the beginning of 1973, Mgr. Kuharic was directly attacked for his concern with the moral, economic and social problems of the Croatian people, which was expressed in one of his pastoral letters. (13) It was clearly stated that he did not have the right to interfere in non-religious affairs whatsoever. "The pharisaical love-thy-neighbor attitude of the Zagreb Archbishop is manifested as an excessive deviation from the agreed upon norms of behavior by a distinguished representative of the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia," stressed the Zagreb daily Vijesti.

Much more violent was the recent attack by the Secretary of the Croatian CC, Josip Vrhovec (vr-ho-veets), against the Catholic fortnightly Glas koncila. Speaking recently at a meeting of the republican BOARD OF THE veterans of Croatia, Vrhovec said that Glas koncila wishes "to take the place of the army who was recently removed from the political scene in Croatia. This paper and quarters standing behind it are attacking under the guise of religion the self-management system, just as Croatian nationalism had done under the guise of the national interest." (14)

Churches Defend Constitutional Rights

This angry reaction by the Croatian CC Secretary reveals, as already mentioned, communist fears and suspicions that both the Roman Catholic and the Serbian Orthodox Church may, in the present situation, become defenders of constitutional and individual rights. Such fears and suspicions may be easily understood in the post-Maradjerdjevo period of Yugoslavia's political development. (15) In this period, when the strengthening of party control over public life and serious restrictions in the sphere of individual rights have been taking place, attempts by the church press and church prelates to argue on non-religious issues usually tolerated in the past, are feeding suspicion and causing hostile reactions on the part of the communist leaders.

Thus the angry statement made by Croatian CC Secretary Vrhovac was actually just a reaction to an attempt by the Catholic Church to defend individual rights. He was arguing with an article published in Glas Hrvatske in which the rights of the Church to protect the "inalienable rights of the human being" were strongly defended. (16) Commenting on the anniversary of St. Poljean, a Christian martyr who died in north Croatia, Glas Hrvatske stressed that he died just because he, as a believer, "interfered in the solution of secular problems." According to the Catholic paper, St. Poljean was concerned with:

The moral life of youth, relations between man and wife, and social equality. Further, Poljean stated that there are just laws, which should be respected by Christians. However, the same authority may promulgate orders which are not just and laws which cannot be respected by believers. And because of such a stand, because of freedom of their conscience, believers prefer death to submission... Because of its religious conviction, the Church defends the inalienable rights of the human being.

The message addressed to the communist party and state authority is quite clear: believers, i.e., citizens, should distinguish between good and bad laws and take their position accordingly. This is a firm rejection of any totalitarian practices and an encouragement to believers to defend their inalienable rights in resisting bad, inhuman laws. It was not astonishing that the party officials reacted angrily, branding the Catholic authorities for making "propaganda for the Catholic political movement." (17)

Interestingly, a few months earlier, the Serbian Orthodox Church also stressed, although on a more practical issue, the right of the Church to defend constitutional and individual liberties. This was in the case of the aforementioned Serbian Bishop Vasilije of Nisa, who was accused of having expressed sharp criticism of the

Serbian government at a meeting in October 1971. Bishop Vasilije spoke to a gathering of some 1,800 people on the occasion of the completion of a church in the village of Brama, in central Serbia. He "worried about the fate of Serbs and their children. He saw very few students at the gathering, and then he attacked the entire system of education and upbringing, and accused and insulted the educational and cultural workers," the Belgrade Politika reported. (18) As a result, the district prosecutor of the city of Cacak lodged criminal charges against Bishop Vasilije. Ultimately, the bishop was sentenced by a communal judge to 38 days' imprisonment.

Although the reaction of the Orthodox Church to the attacks in the press and other mass media in the past was rather careful and flexible, this time, in the case of Bishop Vasilije, the Church authorities are seemingly no longer willing to tolerate such anti-church activity. The reaction was indeed fast and serious. At the May 1972 meeting of the Holy Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the highest Church body categorically defended the accused and sentenced Bishop Vasilije. (19) The Holy Council stated that Bishop Vasilije "was provoked by the local authority," and expressed its deep regrets about the attitude of the authority toward a bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Holy Council called for the charge and the sentence to be annulled.

Seizing the opportunity provided by the Bishop Vasilije case, the Holy Council also referred openly to other violations of individual rights and liberties granted by the Yugoslav Constitution. (20) Thus the Holy Council

expressed its deep regrets because of violations of legal and constitutional rights, which are also valid for the Serbian Orthodox Church, and which have, according to reports from many bishops, been jeopardized in recent times. All of this concerns the Holy Council and [it] expects from the state authorities nothing but respect for state laws and regulations, in particular as far as religious liberties are concerned, which are valid for all, including school children.

This open reminder from the Serbian Church of the necessity to respect constitutional rights and religious liberties is particular in significance. It must be noted that although there have in the past been many conflicts between the religious and state authorities in the press, as well as among individuals, the Holy Council as the highest body of the Serbian Orthodox Church has never before taken such a clear, authoritative stand. It has usually tried to avoid sharpening any conflict. This time, however, it took a firm, unequivocal position, just as had the Roman Catholic Church.

Conclusions

The most recent developments in Yugoslavia have certainly attested to a cooling and deterioration of relations between Yugoslavia's larger religious communities and the state authorities. In implementing the policy of strengthening the party's role in society and restricting individual liberties, the party and state apparatus inevitably collided with both the Roman Catholic and the Serbian Orthodox Churches. The regime is obviously trying to roll back the churches' activity into the strictly limited sphere of religious life. In this newly formed anti-church and anti-religious policy, the Yugoslav communists are using accusations of "nationalistic propaganda" allegedly carried out by both churches as an instrument of intimidation. Nationalism, which in Yugoslavia's past indeed caused as many problems and catastrophes, has always been a serious political argument. This is all the more so since both churches--the Roman Catholic among Croats and the Serbian Orthodox among Serbs--are strongly identified with the respective national communities and, at least in the past, were frequently involved in nationalistic movements.

Now this is certainly not the case. The lesson learned from past errors by both churches was to be extremely careful in dealing with nationalism. It could indeed be said without qualification that in the past period of increased nationalistic agitation in Yugoslavia, both churches have carefully avoided any direct involvement. On the contrary, both sides have shown much more evidence of open warnings and appeals to calm.

On the other hand, it must be noted that the position of both the Roman Catholic and Serbian Orthodox churches has in past years improved considerably in society and vis-a-vis the state. There are many political and sociological factors contributing to such a development. Both the Roman Catholic and Serbian Orthodox churches are conscious of this improved position and are using it when necessary and with caution in defense of constitutional rights and individual liberties rather than in defense of a narrow national interest. This can only strengthen further the position of both churches. Confronted on this battleground, the present anti-church and anti-religious offensive may take an extremely risky and uncertain course.

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- (1) The official statistical sources in Yugoslavia usually avoided publishing data on religious groups. However, according to data collected during the 1963 census, 7,011,000, or 41.4 percent of all Yugoslavs were Orthodox. The second religious group was the Roman Catholics with 4,388,800, or 21.8 percent of the population. About one million Macedonians should be deducted from the Orthodox total, as they have their own Macedonian Church.

- (2) Radio Belgrade, 27 October 1972, 1500 Hrs.
- (3) Radio Zagreb, 27 October 1972, 1500 Hrs.
- (4) Tanjug in Serbo-croat, 28 October 1972.
- (5) Vjesnik, Zagreb, 18 April 1972.
- (6) Pravoslavlje (Orthodoxy), Belgrade, 1 June 1972. See also Izasko Antic, "Serbian Orthodox Church Protests Against Condemnation of Bishop," CEA Research Report No. 1461, 8 June 1972, Radio Free Europe Research.
- (7) Radio Belgrade, 28 October 1972, 1500 Hrs.
- (8) Vjesnik, 25 November 1969. See also Izasko Antic "Yugoslav Archbishop Pleads for Self-management," CEA Research Report No. 0488, 28 November 1969, Radio Free Europe Research.
- (9) Review of International Affairs, Belgrade, 20 December 1967.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) Vecernje novosti, Belgrade, 1 April 1972.
- (12) Bia (Hedelije ilustrirane novine), 8 October 1972.
- (13) Vjesnik, 18 April 1972.
- (14) Tanjug in English, 28 October 1972.
- (15) Karadjordjevo, a place in northern Serbia where, in December 1972, several Croatian party leaders were accused of "having tolerated nationalistic agitation," at a meeting summoned by Tito.
- (16) Glas borca, Zagreb, No. 21 (241), 22 October 1972.
- (17) Tanjug in English, 28 October 1972.
- (18) Politika, Belgrade, 28 October 1972.
- (19) Pravoslavlje, 1 June 1972.
- (20) Ibid.