

RELIGION IN YUGOSLAVIA TODAY

by Stella Alexander

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Religion is still one of the most fascinating aspects of Yugoslavia because of its association with the different nationalities in the country. Yugoslavia has three main religions, Roman Catholicism in Slovenia and Croatia in the north-west, Orthodoxy in the south-east in Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia and Islam in Bosnia and Hercegovina and in the Serbian province of Kosovo, bordering on Albania. There are groups of both Catholics and Orthodox in Bosnia and Hercegovina, a large Serbian minority in Croatia, mostly in the eastern part of the republic and there are groups of Catholics in Serbia with a Catholic bishop of Belgrade and Msgr. Prela, an ethnic Albanian in Kosovo. There are also small groups of Protestants--Methodists, Pentecostals, Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses--who are for the most part in the Vojvodina, the northern province of Serbia and along the northern frontier bordering on Austria and Hungary. They have never been seriously persecuted except for the small groups of pacifists, Nazarenes and Jehovah's Witnesses who refuse to bear arms and are not identified with any particular nationality; their association with pacifists in Britain goes back to the 19th century and to the first world war. It is the identification of religions with nationalities which makes the situation explosive; it is always a lethal mix.

During the war Croatia was taken over, with the help of the occupying German and Italian armies, by a small band of Croat Fascists headed by Ante Pavelic, the *ustase*, many of whom had returned from exile. At first they had the support of the majority of the population, including most of the Catholic hierarchy, who were glad to be rid of what they considered to be Serbian domination. When Yugoslavia--at first the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes--was founded at the end of the First World War, the Serbs considered that the new territories were simply an expansion of the Kingdom of Serbia into a greater Serbia, while the Slovenes and Croats, including the Dalmatians and Istrians who had been a part of Italy and Austria thought of it as a union of South Slavs with equal status. In the Kingdom of Serbia, Orthodoxy was de facto the state religion; one needed a priest to get married or buried; this was so throughout the period of the First Yugoslavia and until the communist Partisans assumed power after the war.

Religious toleration grew slowly after the war, as a rule more quickly in the Catholic than in the Serbian parts of the country; recently, since the beginning of 1989 liberality and

openness have developed very fast, though with a few characteristically Yugoslav hitches and occasional local exceptions, usually in small towns or villages.

In January, 1990, I spent a few days in Ljubljana and Zagreb and talked to a number of priests and politically active Catholics but did not visit Belgrade, so my knowledge of that is taken from specialist press reports. I was told in Ljubljana that Archbishop Sustar, a man with wide European experience and broad vision (he was president of the Conference of Catholic Bishops in Europe), whose behavior is always correct and discreet and who does not seek to influence is nevertheless consulted by many people. I met him and had a long talk with him a few years ago, and I can well believe this: he is quite untainted by nationalism. Cardinal Kuharic, the Archbishop of Zagreb and de facto head of the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia was an outstanding parish priest and a kind and good man, but he lacks the international experience of Archbishop Sustar. The Assistant Bishop, Msgr. Koksa, is another outstanding prelate with many years of experience in Rome as rector of the Croatian College, clever, multilingual, and with a world view.

Archbishop Franic of Split is another influential prelate, he is conservative and rather resents the primacy of Zagreb. He is a strong supporter of the Medjugorje phenomenon--the reported apparitions of the Blessed Virgin to a group of the children in a small village near Mostar, the capital of the republic of Hercegovina, a subject to which I will return to later.

The Serbian Orthodox Church was closely identified with Serbian nationhood under Turkish rule and was established as the Patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1919 as soon as the new state came into being. In the eyes of the church the Patriarchate was not new but renewed, the direct successor of the medieval church founded by St. Sava and the spiritual embodiment of the Serbian people. Under the first Yugoslavia, it was closely identified with the state and its Patriarch was appointed by the King.

Today the Serbian Orthodox Church is intensely nationalist and theologically conservative. Danilo and Amfilohije, two of its leading bishops, were trained by Dr. Justin Popovic, by all accounts an outstanding theologian and intensely conservative; he has set the tone of Serbian Orthodoxy today. It repudiates the central concepts of the European Enlightenment; Danilo, whom I have met and talked to is highly intelligent but medieval in his manner of thinking although he has lived in the United States. Today the Serbian Orthodox Church supports Slobodan Milosevic the conservative and nationalist Serbian leader. Religious feeling among the Serbs is closely tied to nationality and to the soil in a different way from the Catholic Croats and Slovenes who always had Rome and the Vatican to look out to.

The reason for the trouble in Kosovo is that Serbia's holiest places are associated with it, the field of Kosovo [Kosovo Polje], the scene of the medieval Serbian king's historic defeat at the hands of the Turks, and the historic monasteries, Pec Patrijarsija and Gracanica. Twenty years ago the Albanians were still in a minority, but it was noticeable in Pristina, the capital of the province, that every other Albanian woman in the streets

was pregnant. Today the Albanians are in a vast majority and their behavior towards the Serbs is increasingly aggressive. Although the majority of Albanians are Muslim, there is also a Catholic minority and even a small group of Orthodox. Already at that time there were instances of Serbian nuns working in the fields around their convents being attacked and beaten up by Albanians, and today it is reported that the situation is much worse. In retaliation, Pravoslavlje, the official Serbian Orthodox weekly, has been reprinting letters from issues at the beginning of the century, reporting Albanian crimes and assaults against Serbs who were trying to drive them out. Pravoslavlje printed in full a letter from Serbian Orthodox Bishop Nikolai of Dalmatia to the Holy Synod giving details of verbal attacks on Serbian Orthodox priests and describes attacks by vandals on church property in Sibenik, Zadar, Split, and Kastelj, along the Dalmatian coast. This is all part of a campaign to prove that the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian minority in Croatia suffer abuses both from the authorities and the population at large. The situation is gradually changing as Serbs move out of Kosovo because it is and has always been the poorest part of Yugoslavia, and unemployment has always been high; now there is also Albanian pressure on Serbs to move out, and the result is that few Serbs are left in the region. Bishop Prela of Skopje and Prizren, whose diocese contains one of the principal centers of Albanian Muslims is so concerned about the badly turn of events in the province that he has sent an open letter to the Committee for Religious Affairs of Kosovo province, saying that oppression and violence will never bring peace and prosperity to Kosovo; these can only be achieved by letting the province preserve and develop its own identity in freedom. He appealed to the authorities to consult all citizens, regardless of their beliefs, on how best to live together in peace and prosperity. In February 1990 the President of the Federal Government's Commission for Relations with Religious Communities promised that there would be improved status for members of the religious communities in Yugoslavia. It is planned that constitutional amendments will allow believers to be employed in posts of responsibility in the economy and in society in general. Openly practicing believers have been barred from many posts, teaching in school (though not in universities), senior posts in the economy, etc. However the Slovene bishops make it clear that all lay Christians have the right and the duty to take part in political life, in parties and movements, but priests and monks may not be candidates for any parties or make party political pronouncements in their sermons; this is because some priests are active in party political activities. A further statement by the Catholic Commission *Justitia et Pax* (Justice and Peace) at the beginning of February warned the authorities that the multi-party system in Croatia and Slovenia will only flourish if the coming elections are genuinely free and based on a truly secret ballot, if all the new parties get a fair share in public funds and all the material advantages enjoyed by existing political organizations, and all have equal access to the media. An increasing amount of news about religion is appearing in the public press of the Socialist Alliance which has recently been proclaiming its independence from party control. For example Vjesnik (Zagreb) published the whole text of the Catholic bishops' letter to the faithful urging them to vote in the elections; and Iskra the Split youth journal published three of the late Cardinal Stepinac's letters and two from Ante Pavelic. Borba (Belgrade and Zagreb) reported a meeting at which the historian Ljubo Boban lectured on Stepinac's diary which the authorities found and impounded.

This is the general background today. In addition, there are specific incidents which have recently been reported. I have drawn most of these from the Catholic newsletter AKSA which consists of news items written with considerable objectivity and extracts without comment from the daily, weekly, and monthly press of all three religious bodies.

Catholics in Croatia commemorated in February, 1990, the thirtieth anniversary of the death of Cardinal Stepinac, Archbishop of Zagreb before, during, and after the war, who was tried by the post-war government and served five years in prison and the rest of his life in supervised residence in his native village of Krasic. The authorities have already admitted that he would never have been tried if he had agreed to collaborate with them. Cardinal Kuharic renewed his appeal for the reappraisal of the role played by Stepinac during World War II, saying that objective analysis of historical events should be part of the promised process of democratization. This reappraisal would reveal how unjust was the accusation that Stepinac condoned the crimes against the Serbs, Jews and Gypsies committed by the *ustase* during the war; my own researches confirm this. The worst that could be said of him is that it took him too long to recognize the *ustase* crimes and that his early protests had been private. This, of course, refers specifically to Stepinac; there were other prelates and a number of priests who wholeheartedly supported the *ustase* in their misdeeds and in a very few cases joined in the slaughter.

A good deal of ecumenism is manifested by the Catholics; for example, the Catholic Archbishop Perko of Belgrade and delegates representing the Catholic Theological Faculties in Zagreb and Ljubljana attended the liturgy and a commemorative meeting in Belgrade on January 27, St. Sava's day, the Orthodox patron saint. On the other hand the Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church has decided not to take part in any service or events organized by the Catholic Church in Belgrade. But for the first time since the war the republican authorities in Serbia allowed St. Sava's day to be kept in all state schools throughout Serbia. Archbishop Perko complained in a press interview in a Croatian paper (Slobodna Dalmacija 31.12.89) about strong anti-Catholic propaganda which began in 1986 when several books described the Catholic Church as the age-old enemy of the Serbian people, conducting an aggressive policy against the Serbian state, and practicing proselytism. These books were given publicity and quoted in the country's daily and weekly press, including some Orthodox religious ones, though Pravoslavlje did not take part in the attack. But an atmosphere unfavorable to ecumenism has been created and encouragement given to those on both sides who are anti-ecumenical. The Serbian Orthodox bishops did not attend the New Year reception given by the president of Croatia in protest against the attitude of the Croatian leaders to events in Kosovo and their failure to support Serbian policies in this area; while Cardinal Kuharic and Protestant and Islamic leaders advocated the promotion of dialogue between all religious communities.

Another striking example of inter-faith ecumenism happened in December 1989 when for the first time members of the faculties of the Sarajevo Catholic theological schools and the Islamic theological faculty in Sarajevo met. Initiatives had come from both sides, and nearly all the members of the faculties attended and said how glad they were to get to

know each other better and clear away mutual prejudices by bringing Islam and Western Christianity together.

The Islamic weekly Islamska Misao and the main Islamic community journal Preporod organized a round table discussion on fundamentalism which was defined as a system which claimed to be unique in excellence and exclusive of any other; it is of course characteristic of certain members of all religious denominations and the enemy of all ecumenism and objective research. Among the people present were Islamic and Catholic theologians and sociologists specializing in oriental studies and journalists; thirty people were invited, and nineteen accepted. One of the Catholic theologians present, speaking of the educational aspects of fundamentalism, demanded that all education both secular and religious should be free from fundamentalism. This was particularly important for Yugoslavia with its four different traditions: Western Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Islamic, and atheist Marxist.

Numerous small incidents show that the situation is still unpredictable. On December 2, 1989, the police in Duga Sela near Zagreb arrested a newsboy taking Glas Koncila [Voice of the Council], the leading Catholic weekly to the village of Hrusic. These deliveries had been going on for years. Glas Koncila was now accused of spreading *ustasism*. The newsboys were interviewed for three hours, and at the end they were released and warned never to try to sell Glas Koncila again in that district. The paper at once telephoned the local district committee to enquire about the incident, and at the time of writing had still not heard the outcome. In the republic at large, however, both Glas Koncila and Pravoslavlje are sold on newsstands throughout Croatia; previously they could only be found in churches. The publishers of Kana the Catholic family monthly magazine had a long-standing agreement with the news stands, but recently many of the stands have been afraid to display it and have returned bundles of copies, unopened, to the publishers. News has come that men doing their army service may now wear crosses round their necks and have bibles, breviaries and other religious symbols.

The apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Medjugorje continue and pilgrimages are now sanctioned by the authorities since they have brought in and continue to hundreds of thousands of pilgrims and large amounts of foreign currency. New hotels have been built and local inhabitants have been cashing in on bed and breakfast accommodation and eating places. I went there in 1985 when it was still completely undeveloped and frowned on by the authorities, and what struck me was the feeling that this was a good place. But the tensions it has caused between the Bishop of Mostar, who thoroughly dislikes the whole thing, and the local Franciscans who have exploited the visions and the children for all they are worth, are still acute. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that something supernatural took place there, and that initially nothing was deliberately faked, although the former parish priest, who emigrated to the United States and had known the children all their lives, has emphatically repudiated their claims. He believes that the two older girls read about the apparitions at Lourdes and decided to have their own visions, partly by auto-suggestion. Father Rene Laurentin, a distinguished French theologian who was one of the first outsiders to write about it was convinced. It is only some of the later developments which seem questionable to me, e.g. the occasion after the apparitions had

been going on for a long time, when Vicka asked the Blessed Virgin about the conflict between the bishop and the Franciscans. The apparition is reported by Vicka to have said that the bishop had been much too harsh to the Franciscans, who were in the right.

At present Archbishop Franic of Split has said that he believes in the authenticity of the visions and claims that his failing sight (due to diabetes) was restored after he had made a pilgrimage to the shrine. This makes for some embarrassment for the bishop of Mostar, who has the support of most of the hierarchy headed by Cardinal Kuharic of Zagreb, (reflecting perhaps the strains between the Cardinal and Archbishop of Split who has always found it difficult to accept the primacy of the former).

The Yugoslav bishops have asked the Italian bishops not to organize any official pilgrimages and not to encourage unofficial ones, and the Italian bishops have complied, but the pilgrimages continue and that very poor region of Yugoslavia has profited greatly.

An increasing amount of news about religion is appearing in the public press of the Socialist Alliance which has recently been proclaiming its independence from party control. Vjesnik (Zagreb) published the whole text of the Catholic bishops' letter to the faithful urging them to vote in the elections, and Iskra (Split) published three of Cardinal Stepinac's letters and two from Ante Pavelic, the *ustasa* leader. Borba reported a meeting at which the historian Ljubo Boban lectured on Stepinac's diary which the authorities had found and impounded before Stepinac's trial.

This has been a rather scattered account of a situation which continues to develop, and one can only speculate about the future. My own feeling is that the clock cannot be turned back now. The big question mark is Serbia and its unpredictable development; one must pray that it will not become a center for future explosions.