

**RESPONSES TO THE ARTICLE "THE ROLE OF RELIGIONS IN THE WAR  
IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA**

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

Nijmegen, 30.6.93

Dear Editor,

Yesterday I received your very interesting article on the role of the religious communities in the war in former Yugoslavia in the June issue of Religion in Eastern Europe. I noticed of course that you disagree with the thesis that I put forward in my lecture from November 1991 (published 1992 in Religion, State and Society). Well that is a pity. What I tried to do was to deliver an analysis of the development of theological thinking in both churches, and it is that analysis that led to the distinction I made. By the way I do not think that your remark on the late Dr. Josip Turcinovic is correct. It reminded me of the old trick of the authorities to bring about a split between the progressive and liberal theologians on the one hand and the conservative and nationalist theologians and bishops on the other hand. Dr. Josip Turcinovic never allowed them to succeed in that effort. He was a very important teacher of the Church with others such as prof. Dr. Tomislav Sagic-Bunic and Vjekoslav Bajsic. If you study the recent documents of the Catholic Church in Croatia, you will notice, notwithstanding all the struggle there has been that their work has born fruit. Of course there is no safeguard for all times. New theologians are very much needed to take the plough over from their hands because the times are very dangerous now.

You have a different approach towards the complexity of the Yugoslav drama as far as I can see. Your criticism of all institutional religions in former Yugoslavia is a very harsh one because in your opinion the institutional religions bear all a heavy responsibility for getting their people a ticket to hell. It is quite an accusation. It is far more harsh than my attempt to analyze the theological concept of bishop Nikolaj Velimirovic which you say has an anti-Serbian Orthodox bias. I wrote this article in 1986/87 at a time when polemics about religious and national integrity grew, and the memory of bishop Nikolaj was openly revitalized in Serbia. The article was meant to be published in a book about Serbian Orthodoxy but that book never appeared nor did my article. It was with a lot of concern that I wrote that article then and not at all with the intention to attack the Serbian Orthodox Church. The article is written almost exclusively on the basis of Serbian sources (in the publication in Glaube in der 2. Welt [hereafter G2W] in 1993 one did not take the notes because of lack of space). What was at stake in 1986/87 was the revitalization of a concept of thinking that would deteriorate totally the ecumenical dialogue and not only that. At that time I wrote it because I felt I had to do so. Such a process did not occur within Roman Catholic theology, and I hope it will not happen in the future although of course I am also worried when I see a quote like the one from Veritas in your article (I do not know the author). I do not think however that this position is typical for the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia.

The manuscript by Bishop Nikolaj Velimirovic was, so the translator told me some years ago, read by Serbian theologians, who--as he told me--found it interesting. I also asked the reaction on this article from my professor Turcinovic. He did not make a lengthy comment on it. He only said: "It is a good article, but they will not publish it." "Where will it be published," I asked. "Abroad," he said. It was, indeed, several years before it was published thanks to G2W. And of course the impact is now different because there is this diabolical war going on. What was meant as an appeal to come to senses and to dialogue, perhaps as a well-meant warning for certain tendencies in the older Serbian theology, sounds perhaps now as a severe criticism. Certainly such theological thinking is not uniquely Serbian Orthodox, as you say, but that is the point; the point is how it was revitalised in the eighties which was unique.

In your article you distinguish between the contribution of religious communities toward hatred and war and the contribution of religious communities toward reconciliation. The second paragraph, where the ecumenical momentum is highlighted, is very short. For a complete and accurate understanding of ecumenical involvement in the former Yugoslavia it would be interesting to know how come that the international ecumenical bodies and agencies (such as the World Council of Churches and the Council of European Churches) seriously started to give attention to the huge problems and barriers that underlay inter-religious understanding and reconciliation only after the outburst of war in 1991. My intuition tells me that with your approach it would be possible to analyze critically the parallels between the involvement of the international political community (European Community and United Nations) as well as the international ecumenical community. One is one judged in the end not only on the basis of having issued nice statements. And that is the reason why I really do believe that the position of the religious communities, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, or Islamic in the Balkans is, although jeopardized, not worse than elsewhere. I therefore do not understand your accusation at the end of the article which is in my opinion fundamentally false.

Regarding your criticism of the writing of Dr. Anne Herbst of G2W I do not have to react. She can and I hope will speak for herself. But one thing I do want to say: it is very unfair to accuse her for demonizing the Serbian Orthodox Church because she is very active in trying to keep the contacts with the Serbian Orthodox Church open in order to come to a true dialogue. She feels the pain and traumas that are present within the religious communities in the Balkans and is trying to heal them as far as she is able to do so.

Finally about myself. I am not a Catholic priest as you assumed but a so-called lay-theologian, Roman Catholic indeed.

With kind regards,

Geert van Dartel

Zagreb, 23 July 1993

Dear Editor:

In Religion in Eastern Europe Vol. XIII, No. 3, pp. 13-32 Paul Mojzes, the journal's editor, published "The Role of the Religious Communities in the War in Former Yugoslavia." Since the author strongly disagrees with my views expressed in unfinished manuscripts I have given him, I feel obliged to reply to his article.

Even though I consider Dr. Mojzes a friend, I must immediately express my surprise that the editorial board approved an article which is full of uncritical statements, innuendos, and unsupported assertions and which is as uninformed as it is tendentious. Substantial flaws are evident in the very first paragraph. He begins with two premises. The first is the self-evident platitude "that war is the worst form of human interaction." The second is that "cooperation among people," is "more important than national sovereignty" and similar values. He somehow connects these two premises with his main thesis, saying that religious communities in the states of former Yugoslavia were more interested in "national sovereignty" than in "cooperation among people," which makes them responsible for war. He not only wants to prove that religious communities have made major contributions to the war in former Yugoslavia but also distributes that responsibility equally among religious communities in order to diminish the international outrage at the behavior of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Mojzes disregards the obvious fact that "national sovereignty, traditions, customs, and historical boundaries" regularly do not interfere with "cooperation among people." If that is the case with most states in the world, why would it not be the case with the states which emerged out of the dissolution of former Yugoslavia? For some reason Mojzes denies the churches of former Yugoslavia the right to support self-determination of nations to which they belong, a right that I am certain he would not deny to churches in America, France, Greece, or any other state.

Mojzes actually writes under premises which he never states. He blames Croats and the Catholic Church there for the dissolution of Yugoslavia. More importantly, however, he makes a great effort to diminish the outcry of impartial international observers concerning the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church, not only for the dissolution of Yugoslavia but also for waging the war. I count myself among those who do not regret the disappearance of the unfortunate artificial state of former Yugoslavia and who point to substantial evidence of the involvement of Orthodox clergy in the incitement of Serbs in Croatia to rebellion and in the territorial enlargement of Serbia.

Mojzes, however, chooses to distribute the responsibility equally to all religious communities. Since his materials for this position are not abundant, he resorts to unfounded accusations and outrageous statements. He distinguished himself by the statement in Christian Century (November 4, 1933, pp. 996-999) (regretfully but significantly, such articles appear in journals supposedly interested in ecumenism): "If they were in the position, Croats and Muslims would do the same atrocities over the Serbs." Reverend Mojzes seems to be undisturbed that by this logic one could easily justify Hitler's elimination of Jews and Turkish genocide of the Kurds. The tragedy is that

Mojzes uses this logic precisely to diminish the responsibility of the Serbs for waging war against Croats and Muslims and the crimes thereby committed.

Mojzes' piece is full of outrageous statements. For him Croats and Serbs are not nations of the same degree and quality as, for instance, Swedes and Norwegians; they are, according to him, "somewhat akin to tribalism" (probably "tribes"), more similar to Yoruba or Ibo (p. 14) (why the Yoruba cannot be a nation like Swedes only Mojzes knows). He opposes the name of the Catholic Church "among Croats" for linguistic reasons (p. 15). Mojzes is disturbed that the "Roman Catholics of Slovenia perceive themselves having a quite separate religious dynamic of interaction with their nation than the Catholic Church among Croats and vice versa." Would he be disturbed, I wonder, if American and Canadian Catholics had a "separate religious dynamic," as they certainly do! Mojzes uncritically asserts that religious communities "contribute to the sacralization of their respective nationalities" and states without blinking that "religion plays the role of a political ideology."

Of course, Mojzes does not hesitate to accuse the Catholic Church of Croatia and of Bosnia and Herzegovina of nationalism. In the absence of solid evidence he resorts to marginal phenomena, obscure authors, generalizations, and outright misinterpretations. But authors who are critical of the Serbian Orthodox Church he accuses of "an anti-Serbian Orthodox bias"(16).

Mojzes is particularly unfair with the materials I gave him. First of all all the materials were supposed to be for private use only, since they consisted of an unedited version of an article which was to be published in the United States (in Sabrina P. Ramet and Ljubisa S. Adamovic, eds., Beyond Yugoslavia, Boulder, CO.:Westview Press, 1993) and a draft version of another article. While he abundantly uses my materials, he rarely acknowledges the source. This is not, however, the gravest matter. Mojzes takes the case I used to illustrate Catholic challenges to communists in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and uses it as 'proof' of the nationalism of the Catholic Church there.

So what are the manifestations of Croatian Catholics' nationalism according to Mojzes? Defending the right of Croats to use their language in their state, defending the right of their people to self-determination, raising their voice against the Serb oppression of Albanians in the Kosovo province (Mojzes himself says that "no decent human being could be silent on this issue"), being satisfied because of the election victory of the political party, which supposedly "publicly rehabilitated [the Catholic Church] after years of oppression", and promoting "the cult of Alojzije Cardinal Stepinac," who was sentenced by the Communist court to sixteen years of imprisonment in an infamous showtrial typical throughout "Eastern Europe" during those years of terror. These are some of the reasons why Mojzes answers "with an emphatic yes" to the question of whether the Catholic Church of Croatia contributed to the outbreak of war " in a nationalistic manner" (p. 20).

I would say that Mojzes has lost all sense of fairness and appropriateness. This is manifest in his exclusively negative treatment of the Catholic Church as it is in his

straining to justify the Serbs and their Church. Tragically he seems to have adopted the position of much of the Serb propaganda. Although he is not uncritical toward the Serbian Orthodox Church, he uses every opportunity to diminish its responsibility and actually to blame others for its unchristian behavior; most often it is the Catholic Church and the Croats who are blamed! The role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the anti-Croatian hysteria prior to the beginning of aggression on Croatia is justified by what Croats did to Serbs during World War II; he actually says that it is a retribution (p. 23, note 33).

Mojzes counts me among those who are "too harsh on the Orthodox Church prelates and theologians and too lenient with the Catholic ones" (p. 23). Those who know me better will not count me among those who are uncritical of Catholic prelates. It is actually not a question of "harshness" and "leniency" but of looking at the behavior of those prelates with a set of moral principles. If the evidence showed that Catholic hierarchy said or did even vaguely similar things to the Orthodox hierarchy, it would not have received my approval. But I do not consider it fair nor responsible to invent misconduct of individuals just so that my writing may appear to the readers in the West more balanced. The consequences of the supposedly balanced reporting that equates the aggressor and the victim are visible in the shameful position of the world political leadership but even more poignantly in Croatian hospitals and graveyards. They are also visible in articles that Mojzes and others of the same bent produce. Instead of representing ourselves as "decent human beings," as Mojzes is urging us to be, he shamelessly tries to cover and even justify the despicable conduct of Serbian Orthodox clergy, from priests and bishops to the very top of the hierarchical structure of that Church. What this does to ecumenism, I hardly have to explain.

Jure Kristo

## **RESPONSES TO GEERD VAN DARTEL AND JURE KRISTO**

The exchange of criticisms is an important avenue for a more complete understanding of truth. My article, "The Role of the Religious Communities in the War in the Former Yugoslavia," was meant to share my perspective on the complex and tragic situation and my conviction that institutional religious communities there have done more to contribute to the present mutual extermination than to bring about reconciliation. By publishing these letters to the editors and my own response to them I hope that readers will be able either to correct their views should they feel that I misled them or to make a decision which of these interpretations is sounder. I also hope that additional readers will join this discussion in order to enlarge our scope of discernment.

### **REPLY TO VAN DARTEL:**

I appreciate the tone of your letter and the explanations of the genesis of your study of Serbian Orthodox theology. Since your letter was written, I had a chance to see a touching video of the ravages of the war in Slavonia (Croatia) in which you had a major role, entitled "Why? Why?". I agree that it is a pity that we do not agree, but I think the

reason is that you view the conflict on the basis of your personal experiences primarily in Croatia while I have made very deliberate efforts to explore it also from the perspective of the other sides in the conflict which resulted in my unwillingness to identify myself too closely with any of the perspectives. Generally this results in displeasure about my interpretation by most people who are engaged in this conflict.

To make a distinction between people such as Turcinovic, Bajsic, and Sagi-Bunic and some other Roman Catholic thinkers is not at all a ploy to set one segment of the Catholic community against another but simply to point out that not all are like-minded or equally nationalistic. I believe this to be true about the Orthodox and the Catholic (as it is true more universally). In my previous contacts with Croatian Catholics I have gotten a much greater appreciation of the insights which some of these thinkers and leaders have than others.

You are quite correct in pointing out that my criticism of the religious institutions is far more harsh than yours. For one thing it is more inclusive than your criticism because I think it is mandatory to use the very same criteria in evaluating the role of one religious community or leadership as another. Recently I have returned from a three week trip to Serbia, Macedonia, Croatia, and Slovenia in which I carried on an in-depth conversation with a very large number of prelates, clergy, political leaders, intellectuals, and common people of many nationalities, religious, and orientations. The trip resulted in minor adjustments of my views and in a wealth of new insights, but I find no need for a major re-assessment of what I wrote last spring. I think that those who know more about this facet of the war should highlight the self-sacrifice and the benevolence of relief-effort and the sometimes equitable assistance given to wounded people of all sides. But too frequently I found only the ability to see the suffering of one's own people and the lack of pain and concern for the fears and sufferings of the enemy.

Finally let me say that I did not intend to question your and Dr. Anne Herbst's lack of desire to work toward improved Catholic-Orthodox ecumenical relationships, but I do think that you judged one church harder than others. You may be right that the lack of mutual charity between religious communities is not a Balkan monopoly, but gratefully there are places where such relations are much better, and there are not many places where such relations are worse. Indeed you are right to note that my criticism could be extended to such organizations as the World Council of Churches, the Council of European Churches, and if I may add, the Conference of European Catholic Bishops, or Organization of Islamic States, as well as the CE and UN. The problem stems, I think, from going and visiting only one side in the conflict and feeling solidarity only for this one side. Since the Serbian Orthodox Church is member of the WCC, their statements reflect the compassion that the members of the fact-finding teams had for the suffering they saw there. When Catholic bishops visit Croatia or predominantly Croatian parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, they end up solidarizing with their suffering. The Muslims show concern for the Muslims. This is natural but there is a need to go much beyond that. One must muster the integrity and moral courage to protest equally vigorously when 'one's own side' does something dastardly as one protested when the other side did. I think

the U.S. Bishops Conference provided such a balanced approach in some of their most recent letters to Croat and Muslim authorities about the new waves of "ethnic cleansing."

I do hope that you will feel free to send some of your thoughtful observations to this periodical for publication.

#### REPLY TO JURE KRISTO:

Our friendship of many years makes this interchange that much more painful. Indeed we do not see eye to eye on a lot of issues, including the issue which is under discussion. I am not elated that you resort to name-calling rather than simply stating areas of disagreement and supporting your own contentions. You seem to be a victim of a tenor of confrontation so frequently encountered in intellectual and media circles of the states of the former Yugoslavia; thus, it is no surprise that it is hard to improve relations among those who disagree when arguments are used that generate more heat than light. It is important that our readers see that.

The strength of your reply is that it is unambiguous. Your position that the Serbian Orthodox Church contributed and contributes to a war of aggression is clear, and you state no qualifications. It is also clear that not once did I encounter in your writing a single self-critical note about Croatia or the Catholic Church, though you do claim that you are critical. Claiming something is not the same as doing it.

It is not my intention of saying that the Catholic Church is doing everything wrong. Cardinal Franjo Kuharic and others have issued many touching appeals to their constituency not to seek revenge but to forgive--just as Patriarch Paul did. The latter you fail to note in your writings. The leadership of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia, just as, regretfully, the other religious leaders, seem to lack that which one would hope religious leaders to be able to do better than the general population or political leaders, namely to see the signs of the times. Instead of looking beyond the immediate problems and anticipating the long range impact and seeing the comprehensive needs not only of their own diocese to comprehend the more universal picture, they tend to be only pastors of their own flock. I suppose I grieve that there are too many priests and too few prophets. A priest is mostly concerned for the institutional well-being of the people for whom one has responsibility; a prophet is called to tell the truth and reserve the harshest criticism to one's own people. I have met some such prophets both among the Serbian Orthodox and the Croatian Roman Catholics, but they are, indeed, a lone cry in the wilderness.

I resent the implication that I somehow did not adequately acknowledge the use of your articles. The very reason that they were as yet unpublished led me not to cite verbatim with page numbers specifically because I did not want to hang my argument on some unfortunate turn of phrase which you might have corrected in a later version. But your material was not for private use only, nor is the nature of the material such that you would for any reason wish not to own up to what you wrote. Hence I explicitly mentioned you prominently, though I had no intention to highlight you as some sort of

exception, because your views in these papers reflected authentically what I know you deeply believe from my other knowledge of you. You probably have a cause for unhappiness in regard the way in which I used the material, namely by turning your argument from its head to its feet (or vice versa), but indeed I thought you provided ample evidence for a political involvement of the Croatian Catholic leadership. You were focusing only on its role in the fight against communism, but I saw its negative by-product the spread of national chauvinism which says more about a one-track mind preoccupied with anti-Communism while at the same time not seeing the other destructive forces lurking in the demise of Communism.

You are also oversimplifying my views in order to ridicule them. A statement of my conviction "that war is the worst form of human interaction" is not a self-evident platitude, at least not in the Balkans. You know too well the slogans "better war than a pact" or Iztbegovic's statement that war is preferable to the Muslims than what the Serbs and Croats have offered them for a peace settlement at Geneva. Contrary to your assertion I did state my premise rather clearly. Equally oversimplifying is the statement: "He blames Croats and the Catholic Church there for the dissolution of Croatia." Yes I do but not only them and not even mostly them. Nor am I diminishing the role of the Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church in that process as you accuse me, though again, I do not think they alone are to be blamed, as one often hears and as you tended to do in your two articles.

I suppose that the greatest surprise in your reply is your continued criticism of my statement first published in The Christian Century that Croats and Muslims are as capable of atrocities as Serbs are. At the time when I wrote this, I had history and the personal knowledge of the area for my source. More recently--and both prior and after your letter of July 23--we have pictorial evidence of such atrocities for the whole world to see. How can you still object rather than express shock and regret. I did not content that the atrocities are quantitatively the same. I don't think they are although the final count will take again a long time to come, and in the meantime people on all sides of the conflict will abuse the figures for propaganda advantages and for the fuelling of future wars. What pains me is that you show little or no ethical sensibility that the war crimes of one group do not justify the war crimes committed by one's own side (parathetically this is the point where your analogy of Nazis and Jews is invalid). The sad thing is that you are not the only one showing this weakness; my recent trip confirmed that it is an extremely widespread phenomenon (dare I call it sin?).

I am tempted to answer the other criticisms, e. g. my use of the notion of tribalism (for which I can show a host of references in the publications from the territory of the former Yugoslavia), but this may be both petty and exhaust the patience of the reader. It is my hope that both have been helpful to those who wish to understand the role of religion in this war and who have less opportunities for first hand observation. Those may find useful insights in our exchange while others who know the situation well may decide to send in their own written contributions.

Paul Mojzes

