

EVANGELISM AND PROSELYTISM IN CROATIA

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To analyze the issue of proselytism in Eastern Europe is a big task and great challenge. After The Great Transformation Eastern Europe became a big religious market place where we face a real battle for souls. Historical and dominant churches and religions try to protect their spiritual and cultural monopoly they had over the centuries. Some of the Protestant and Evangelical Churches have plans to evangelize all people of Eastern Europe. Many Christian marginal groups, sects, and cults are "selling" their "truth" at newly opened spiritual market place. Eastern religions and religious groups with known and unknown gurus and different practices are very popular. The pluralism of interests makes the battle for souls very contested and sometimes very dirty.

Christianity is the predominant religion in Eastern Europe. Today in Eastern Europe four major Christian groups exist: Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, and Evangelicals/Pentecostals. In Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, and Slovenia the Catholic Church is predominant. Rumania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia are predominantly Orthodox countries. In the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Western Rumania the numbers of Protestant believers are significant. Evangelicals/Pentecostals are a minority in all countries, but in some countries (Rumania, Bulgaria, Albania) they are rapidly growing communities.

Croatia is predominantly Roman Catholic country, with significant numbers of Orthodox Christians (now mostly in exile) and Muslims. Protestants/Evangelicals are a minority with a few thousands members in four significant denominations: the Evangelical Church (Pentecostal), the Union of Baptist Churches, the Reformed Christian Church, and the Evangelical Church (Lutheran). There are smaller denominations and independent churches as well.

At the end of the twentieth century, Croatia exhibits many characteristics of a secular society. Labeled 'post-modern,' this is reflected in features such as materialism, individualistic consumerism, fragmentation, erosion of the Judeo-Christian moral heritage, and severe pressure on the family as an institution. Moral relativism pervades the public debate and private conduct. Religious pluralism is coupled with political correctness and syncretism. There is cynicism about truth claims and authority is questioned. Within religious communities people became aware of tensions and conflict created by proselytism, which are still not solved on proper way.

Nature and characteristics of proselytism

Today proselytism is described with negative connotation when it is applied to activities of Christians to win adherents from other Christian communities. The definition of proselytism by the World Council of Churches is:

Proselytism embraces whatever violates the right of the human person, Christian or non -

Christian, to be free from external coercion in religious matters, or whatever, in the proclamation of the Gospel, does not conform to the ways God draws free men to himself in response to his calls to serve in spirit and in truth.

Proselytism includes certain activities which often aim at having people change their church affiliation. Some of the activities are described such as the following:

1. Making unjust or uncharitable references to other churches' beliefs and practices and even ridiculing them.
2. Comparing two Christian communities by emphasizing the achievements and ideals of one, and the weaknesses and practical problems of the other.
3. Employing any kind of physical violence, moral compulsion and psychological pressure, e. g. the use of certain advertising techniques in mass media that might bring undue pressure on readers/viewers.
4. Using political, social and economic power as a means of winning new members for one's own church.
5. Extending explicit or implicit offers of education, health care, or material inducements or using financial resources with the intent of making converts.
6. Manipulative attitudes and practices that exploit people's needs, weakness or lack of education especially in situations of distress, and failing respect their freedom and human dignity.

Proselytism, according to the document *Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission*, is a perversion of genuine evangelism, a form of '*unworthy witness*.' Proselytism occurs wherever the evangelizer's *motive* is unworthy, the *methods* are unworthy or the *message* is unjust or uncharitable in its portrayal of the other's faith community.

Some facts of proselytism in Croatia

The issue of proselytism is frequently raised in Croatia, as in other parts of Eastern Europe against churches and mission agencies involved in evangelistic outreach, and organizations that are involved in relief and development activities. Churches and mission agencies are labeled as proselytizers because of their evangelistic approach and activities. On other hand, established churches are labeled as proselytizers because of their use of media, education, political power, and for making unjust or uncharitable references to other churches. Here are some key examples:

1. *Historic churches vs. new churches.* Most Roman Catholic theologians and sociologists are thinking and writing about Christianity in Croatia in two basic blocks: *historic churches* and *new churches*. Historic churches--the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Church and Protestant churches stemming from the Reformation--are viewed by society as privileged churches because of their centuries-long tradition in Croatian land; they are ecumenical because of their search for Christian unity and their respect for all religious beliefs. New churches--mostly Baptists, Pentecostals and Independent churches--are viewed by the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church as new religions and labeled as 'sects.' It is normal to use the language of 'sects' to describe churches whose historical roots in Croatia are less than 200 years old. While some Roman Catholic bishops and theologians will not include Evangelicals in the category of 'rapacious wolves,' most priests on the local level will do it.

2. *Labeling as 'sect' and 'dead church.'* Usually some of the members of historical churches will label Evangelicals as '*sects*' while some Evangelicals will label historical churches as a '*dead church*' or '*political party*.' In practice labels such as 'sect,' 'dead church' or a 'political party' are used for daily political reasons by churches. Labels are used as weapons for defense or conquest. By labeling Evangelicals as 'sect' historical churches try to protect their nominal believers from evangelical influence. Parents, afraid

of the influence of sects, will control their children and send them to the Catholic Church to protect them. The word 'sect' in Croatian society has a negative connotation. Sects are alleged to be using sexual perversion for recruitment of new members, they use drugs, they are connected with terrorists, they use brain washing methods in training. Christians sometimes use the word 'sect' for religious groups other than their own, simply to express non-acceptance of other religious group. There is still a lack of mutual acceptance and recognition of Evangelicals by Roman Catholic Church in Croatia. Even though the Baptist Union and the Evangelical Church (Pentecostal) are members of ecumenical bodies like the Conference of European Churches, they are still labeled as 'sects.' This is often as much due to non-theological as to theological factors.

Some evangelicals use for the historical churches the label '*dead church*' or '*political party*' to deny their spiritual authority and build their own spiritual authority. The labeling by both sides functions as a recruitment of members, and is a form of proselytism.

3. *Humanitarian activities.* During the war in Croatia thousands of people were in great need. Churches and religious communities concentrated on helping people physically and spiritually. Almost All humanitarian organizations use some kind of promotional and evangelistic material distributed in parcels with humanitarian help. Evangelicals distributed mostly the New Testament or Christian books such as Billy Graham's *Peace of God*. Those activities were considered by Roman Catholics as proselytism. One Roman Catholic priest during a mass called the book *My First Bible satanic*. This book had been distributed by some Evangelicals as a Christmas present with humanitarian aid. In particular, the Croatian Bishops Conference (15.-17. March, 1994) labeled the Baptists who distributed Christian literature in public schools with humanitarian aid as proselytizers.

A long public discussion was held when one Croatian Baptist humanitarian organization channeled funds by the government of Holland for a thousand milk-cows and farms, for the purpose of post war development of the region. Local Roman Catholics considered that action as a form of proselytism. They put pressure on the district prefect and he responded by saying: "You do not need to look at Baptists like the black devil; they are Christians too. And let me stress that Bill Clinton is a Baptist too."

Other Evangelical humanitarian organizations are in the some position. They are viewed as proselytizing agencies of 'sects,' and they are 'necessarily an evil' which the Catholic Church, state, and society need to tolerate because many thousands of hungry people had been helped by them.

4. *Evangelistic activities.* Basically all evangelistic activities of Evangelicals which are not organized together with Roman Catholic Church are labeled as proselytism. In particular, when the organization "Gospel in every home" distributed their promotional material in mail boxes, the Roman Catholic Church invited their believers to put those materials into garbage. The Roman Catholic Church is afraid of the "americanization" of Croatia. The reasons for this are that, First, almost all sects and cults come to Croatia from or through the USA. Second, Evangelicals, particularly Pentecostals, are the most active in evangelism in Latin America where the Roman Catholic Church loses every day between 6,000 and 8,000 members. The Catholic Church is afraid that, in post-modern and secularized Croatia, it will lose a lot of church members if Evangelicals, particularly Pentecostals, will be effective evangelizers in Croatia as they are in Brazil.

On the other side, Evangelicals are afraid of re-Catholization of Croatia, which for some people means "restoration of European history" or back to the 'dark ages.' There are some signs of 'Catholic totalitarianism,' but still not enough to be worried. While Evangelicals are talking about evangelization, Catholics are talking about re-evangelization. But, just as Catholics excluded Evangelicals from plans and strategies for re-evangelization, Evangelicals excluded Catholics from their plans and strategies for evangelization of Croatia.

Although the Catholic Church has no reason to be afraid of Evangelicals and Pentecostals--they being very small communities with less than 5,000 believers and they open to cooperation in evangelism--there are a few groups of marginal Protestants, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists, who believes that truth resides only inside their organization and that all others, including Catholics, Evangelicals, and Orthodox, are their 'field' for evangelization. Some 'business'-minded missionary organizations and 'private' ministries, mainly from the West, use unworthy methods for recruitment of people, especially leaders, but they are not very strong in Croatia.

5. *Use of media, education and political power as proselytism.* The Roman Catholic Church in Croatia, like other historical churches in Europe, has a vision to achieve a greater spiritual and political influence upon society or to stabilize the influence and position they already have. The Church has a great influence on the society through media, schools, and kindergartens. Some sociologists think and openly speak about proselytism of historical Churches (mainly Catholic and Orthodox Churches) and religions (Muslim) supported by the governments and laws. In particular, the agreement between the state of Croatia and the Vatican gave to the Roman Catholic Church privileges which only state churches have. Because that agreement is international, no other agreement of the state of Croatia with any other Church or religious community will be of such high value. The Roman Catholic Church has succeeded in obtaining the approval of the Croatian parliament (*Sabor*) to include Catholic religious education (Catholic catechism) as part of the public school curriculum. Religious education of minority churches and religious communities is tolerated in public schools, but there are no written rights, such as for the Roman Catholic Church, which will protect them. Minority churches are concerned that their children are going to feel discriminated in the school system, or that they will be proselytized by the Roman Catholic teachers.

The Council and Management of the Croatian Radio and Television shows preference to the Roman Catholic Church over the minority churches, according to the Croatian Association for Religious Liberty. In September 1994, the Association and several religious denominations submitted a petition to the state-owned Croatian radio and television company and to the State Commission for religious affairs in which those religious denominations expressed dissatisfaction with the way religious denominations are treated by state radio and television. The petition points to the "one-sided programming policy of the Religious affairs Department of Croatian Television which--based upon personal prejudice rather than the Croatian Constitution--decides which religious denominations should or should not be represented in its programs." According to the petition it is discrimination against those religious denominations which are not regarded as "historical," are not members of ecumenical bodies, or are labeled as 'sects.' Today, even churches which are members of ecumenical bodies, are discriminated against. Such are the Reformed Christian Church and the Evangelical Church (Pentecostal) which are members of Conference of European Churches.

Differing Perspectives

The issue of proselytism raises some fundamental differences about perspective. First, there are *differing perspectives on what it means to be a Christian*. For established churches Christians are all those who are baptized, no matter what they believe and how they live. There are various degrees of belonging to the church and a few categories of membership in established churches such as "active," "lapsed," "inactive," and "nominal" members. Evangelicals accept as members only those who actively believe in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord and act in accordance with their belief. For Evangelicals true Christians are disciples of Jesus who daily learn from God's word and practice it. Hence for Evangelicals, all those who do not believe and act according to God's word are legitimate objects of evangelization. These two differing perspectives on what it means to be a Christian can illustrate basic questions which people usually ask when they like to know who is Christian. To know whether someone is Christian (Roman Catholic) or a member of some other religion or sect, Cardinal Franjo Kuharic suggested to Roman Catholic believers to ask three questions: What they think about the pope?, Do they love the "Mother of

God"?, What they think about the mass? Evangelicals for the same reason have another set of questions: Do they know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior?, Do they read the Bible, the Word of God?, Are they filled with the Holy Spirit?

Second, there are *differing perspectives on the church*. For the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church the church is one and it is visible. The church has a hierarchy, a canonical territory, and clear jurisdiction. The churches claim territory as their private spiritual ownership, and all other churches or bodies that call themselves church, are treated on that territory as thieves. For Evangelicals, on the other hand, the true church is invisible, with many visible churches. There is one Church--Christ's Church, but there are a lot of different local communities where people can worship God in the manner they prefer and find spiritual food they need.

Third, there are *differing perspective on evangelism*. While established churches are concentrating on the process of preservation of their members, evangelical churches are more concentrating on the process of wining new members. It is understandable as established churches baptize all children born to them on the basis of the faith of their parents and the church. After the baptism of infants established churches need to take care of them, so that they will grow spiritually and become responsible members of the church. During the process of education (catechesis) one becomes a responsible Christian. In established churches evangelism is catechesis. They have a lot of members born and baptized into the church, and their tasks is to evangelize and preserve them. Most Evangelicals, on other hand, share the Gospel with adults and baptize them on the basis of their personal faith. Evangelism is the proclamation of good news about Jesus Christ and his work of salvation for everyone. It is a great task for all Christians to evangelize every one who does not know Jesus Christ as personal Savior.

Fourth, there are *differing perspective on ecumenical dialogue*. There have been at least two types of ecumenical dialogue present in Croatia. First, the ecumenical dialogue and activities of "historical" Churches--the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church and the Lutheran Church--were concentrated on *common values* like liturgy, tradition, and structures. Second, Evangelicals have been concentrating on *common goals* like evangelism, church planting, and church growth.

Ecumenical dialogue between the Roman Catholic, the Orthodox and the Lutheran Church are more liturgical, traditional, and historical, but less active in evangelism. Ecumenical dialogue of the *common values type* was dynamic before the Great Transformation, but because of the war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina the dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church disappeared.

Ecumenical dialogue of the *common goal type* was good before the Great Transformation and has been much better in the past few years after the Great Transformation. Based on the Bible and keeping the Lausanne Covenant Evangelicals agreed to work together on a common goal: to evangelize all people who don't know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. During the time of Great Transition in Eastern Europe Evangelicals formed Alliances in most countries, for example in Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Romania, and Serbia. One of the few tasks of Alliances is the coordination and partnership in evangelism. For Evangelicals spiritual unity is important. They believe that Christ's Church *is* and *needs to be* united by Holy Spirit, not by one organization with the pope as its head. Christians have to show spiritual unity by loving each other, blessing each other, and by working together in partnership on one task--to fulfill God's commandments.

During the past years ecumenical dialogue between established churches and Evangelical churches active in evangelism was at a low level. However, in January 1997, representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Church (Pentecostal), the Baptist Union, the Reformed Church and the Evangelical Church (Lutheran) met together and shared their understanding of ecumenism and principles for their relations and future cooperation. At the end of The First General Croatian Ecumenical meeting, representatives of six Croatian churches signed a statement in which

churches would like to represent the sign of hope, peace, and reconciliation.

Evangelism and the "gray area"

Croatia, as was pointed out, is predominately a Roman Catholic country. It is claimed that it is "Catholic," namely "Christian," because in past times the Gospel was preached there, people were baptized into the Roman Catholic Church, the culture has been Christianized, and the Roman Catholic Church is entitled to cultural hegemony. But, are all Roman Catholics Christians? Are all Roman Catholics saved? The answer to this questions is very important for the issue of evangelism and proselytism. At Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church proclaimed that many members of the Church are in the Church by their "body" but not by their "heart." The Roman Catholic Church in Croatia became, like all traditional Churches in Europe, an institution in which priests promote more cultural, national, and folklore heritage, rather than performing believers' rites and promoting believers' experience.

If we talk about the problem of proselytism inside the Christian family we need to talk about the problem of *evangelism* too, because, one group's evangelization is another group's proselytism. In the life of Evangelical churches evangelism is in the first place. Evangelization of the world presupposes that the whole Church will communicate to the whole world the full Gospel. The church is the living community of God's people, not an institution. Preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ is God's command for all Christians. Although all Christian churches are doing some kind of evangelism, the results are different, and a lot of the members of historical churches are not evangelized yet. The "gray area" in all discussion is the large number of people in established churches in a secularized society, who are baptized as infants but who are nominal Christians. Probably all Christian churches will agree that there is no need to evangelize Christians who know Jesus Christ and have a personal Bible-based relationship with God. The question is what to do with people who are Christians by tradition but not by personal experience in relationship with God? Within Christianity that group of people is up to 85% of church members and depend on how much churches reach their members with the Gospel. The real battle for souls is within that group of people and most theologians will agree that reaching people of that group is *not proselytizing*.

Traditional Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches, face the problem that less than 20% of their membership is in some way active in the church. In the Catholic Church most of the young people after the sacrament of confirmation do not go to church. In Croatia during the war a lot of adults were baptized in the Catholic Church, but less than 15% of them participate in the Sunday Eucharist.

Here are some facts from one of the average Catholic parishes in Zagreb. Catholics are 92.1% (17,500 persons) of the population (19,000) of that region. At Sunday masses or worship services 17.26% of members of the Catholic Church participate. Men are 2.91%, women 7.34%, boys 1.22%, girls 1.77% and children 4% (*Glas Koncila*). Although Catholics are 92.1% by statistical data, the real practical involvement in the life of the church is less than 17.26%. What about the rest of the 74.84% of Catholics? Although they are baptized in the Catholic Church, and they belong to the Church, practically they do not. Catholicism is just the faith of their parents and grand parents.

The problem of evangelism is a real issue in Eastern Europe. People can't live by the faith and spiritual experience of their parents; they are looking for their personal faith and experience. Today more people are leaving churches because they do not find a good reason to stay in the church, than because someone from another religious group invited them to leave.

Although the Catholic Church is speaking about evangelism, they haven't found a way to evangelize Catholics who are baptized as children, but not evangelized. The same situation is in Orthodox Churches and some Protestant denominations. They can't answer the questions their young generation asks, nether can they point out to them the way to a personal experience with God. So, the spiritual leaders become frustrated and they try to find reasons why people leave their Church. Usually

other Christian Churches or new religious movements are guilty and 'persecuted' for that.

It is true that all Christian Churches and religious groups are, in some way, proselytizing, but the dominant Churches and religions are 'helping' them by their own spiritual unproductivity. People in Eastern Europe are looking today for spiritual experience and they will go from group to group to find it. The old beliefs of their parents and grand parents are not their personal experience and not strong enough to keep them from a new spiritual experience. Usually people are making a compromise between the old and the new.

However, in Evangelical Alliances the situation is different. In most countries they are minority with less than 1% of the population. Evangelicals participate in Sunday worship services on an average of 90% or higher of church membership. Most of the Evangelical denominations and independent Churches are very strong in evangelism. Based on the Bible and keeping the Lausanne Covenant Evangelicals try to evangelize all people who don't know Jesus Christ as personal Savior. The goal of Evangelicals is evangelism not proselytism, but in the process of evangelism it can happen that the members of other churches will join Evangelicals. However, some believers from Evangelical churches will join some other churches too. The target of evangelicals is not to win practicing believers of other churches, but to reach those people not reached by the Gospel.

Towards Common Mission

Mission belongs to the very being of the Church and evangelization is in first place. The Church has a task received by Jesus Christ: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Mt 28:19-20). The missionary task of the Church needs to be priority to all churches in today's secularized world. No one church can accomplish it alone; churches are invited to be united in evangelization. Evangelicals understand that some forms of organizational unity are not promoting evangelization, therefore in the Lausanne Covenant a call is written to all Bible-believing Christians to be united in fellowship, work and witnessing. In order to fulfill their task credibly, the churches should not develop their mission in competition with one another, but rather in cooperation, as a common witness to the world. In that spirit evangelicals are viewing the issue of proselytizing and ecumenical dialogue. Today, in an increasingly pluralistic world, ecumenical dialogue can not be set against a negative idea such as proselytism. Dialogue needs to be set for positive common values and tasks such as fellowship in love and common witness to the world. Ecumenical dialogue cannot replace evangelism or mission; it needs to encourage it.

The churches should see their mission as a partnership, even when there are differences in understanding of mission or of evangelization among them. No church should consider itself to have a greater right than another to conduct mission or evangelization. Churches should have a common vision of unity. In particular, let us look on a common vision of unity approved by World Council of Churches:

The unity of the Church to which we are called is a *koinonia* given and expressed in: the common confession of the apostolic faith, a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministers are mutually recognized and reconciled, and a common mission witnessing to all people to the gospel of God's grace and serving the whole of creation. The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy catholic and apostolic church in its fullness. This full communion will be expressed on the local and universal levels through conciliar forms of life and action.

The churches should be open to the call of repentance and for the renewal of their efforts. These efforts include self-critical reflection on our relationship with other churches, openness to appreciate authentically evangelical expressions of life in them, and dialogue where they will speak meaningfully

and honestly to one another, discussing difficulties as they arise and trying to build up relationship. In particular, the Protestant Evangelical Council of Croatia (PEV) is an ecumenical body which draws its membership from across all the streams of evangelicalism. The PEV was founded in recognition of the practical power of biblical unity in diversity. United under common mission Evangelicals try to solve the problem of proselytizing by ongoing dialogue and by practical Christian fellowship and compromise. It is not an easy and nor a fully successful process, but this is how most of the problems of proselytizing can be solved.

In November 1996, leaders from the Croatian Baptist Union and Evangelical Church (Pentecostal) discussed the issue of proselytism between their denominations. At the end they signed a document, *Promemorija*, by which they confirmed that their churches are part of the Body of Christ, that they will persistently follow the example of Jesus Christ, and suggested to local churches how to overcome the problem of proselytism in their activities. *Promemorija* suggested some guidelines for churches, of which I chose three:

We will not stimulate transfer from local church of one denomination into the local church of an other denomination.

We will respect the freedom of every person to chose the local church and denomination.

If someone insists to go to the other church we will bless him or her and release.

As one of the leaders who signed *Promemorija* I witness that this paper was signed in the spirit of unity and fellowship in God's Kingdom. It is not enough to denounce proselytism. We need to continue to work for the common Christian witness through prayer, evangelism, common retreats, Bible courses, religious education, humanitarian matters, and theological dialogue. Churches that show signs of spiritual vitality in faith, life, and witness appear to be relatively immune to losses resulting from proselytism.