

THE PROBLEM OF PROSELYTIZING IN SLOVENIA

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1. The religious map of Slovenia

There are two indigenous religious communities in Slovenia. Historically, culturally, and politically the Slovenian national identity has been built decisively for more than a thousand years by the Catholic faith and Church. That is why today about 75% of the population of about two million have declared themselves as Catholics and 25% of those are regular churchgoers. The second indigenous religious group is the Evangelical Lutheran Church which represents one per cent (20,000) of the population.

As the heritage of the former Yugoslavia there are also small communities of Orthodox Christians (Serbs and Macedonians) and Muslims (Bosnians and Albanians). Both religious affiliations are closely related to their ethnic background. Neither of these remaining communities has shown any discernible attempt to spread their faith among Slovenians or members of other communities. There is some kind of tacit agreement that Slovenia is "Catholic." Nonetheless, they all claim equality for all religious communities and support the secularism of the State, which is not harmful to them but to the Catholic Church.

There are no signs suggesting that there is any kind of proselytizing, competition, and conflict between these old classic religious communities. Just the opposite may be true. Indeed, there is an ecumenical and inter-religious collaboration among the above mentioned communities. Also, the Catholic Church has provided for their use buildings owned by the Catholic Church for worship or similar meetings.

It should be underlined that the Catholic Church in Slovenia is more similar to the same Church in France than to the Croatian or Polish Catholic Church which have some syndromes of nationalistic Churches as their Orthodox neighbors. That means the Catholic Church in Slovenia does not understand the Slovenian nation as its proper reserve where it has its exclusive rights "to hunt and fish." On the one hand the Catholic Church is conscious of its historical and cultural role in shaping the Slovenian identity, but on the other hand it knows very well it has to address each human being personally inviting him or her to follow Christ in the Catholic way. This personal approach is the only acceptable and possible way of evangelism in the greatly secularized and pluralistic Slovenian society. Generally speaking, in Slovenia one can observe a significant religious indifference to all classical religious traditions. There has been no substantial change in the religious situation after the fall of the communism.

Nonetheless, one can observe slight changes in some areas of this religious picture. There are also some new religious or spiritual movements and groups that have recently appeared on the religious scene. The Slovenian government has registered and legalized more than thirty new sects and religious movements. All of them have very few members (from ten to about a hundred) but some of them are increasing relatively fast. It is here that one could discern some elements of proselytizing. The target of the new religious groups is mostly the Catholic youth and students who are open to the religious dimensions of life. The Catholic Church seems to be unable to prevent it and has a feeling of being somehow besieged. Its reflex is to claim its national, cultural, and moral role in the formation of the Slovenian people in the past and today. It presents itself, and this is true, as a part of the Slovenian cultural identity, and asks, therefore, for itself and the indigenous Evangelical Church a special treatment among religious groups in Slovenia. We can understand this claim for some special treatment not only as a mere self-defence

reaction of the largest Church in the country but as a claim to obtain the same treatment by the government as the other religious groups have received.

2. Political and ideological context

For a better understanding of the religious situation and relationship among various religious groups in Slovenia one has to take into account a special Slovenian political and ideological context. The Slovenian "liberals" (former communist youth) who are in the charge of the government view the Catholic Church through the lens of their ideology as a political power and its only really dangerous political rival. One of the most obviously unacceptable ideas and claims of Slovenian liberals is that religion and especially the Catholic Church should be a strictly private thing. One aspect of this "liberal" strategy--I mention it because it is linked to the context of the proselytizing--is the fact of the State's support and favor of the new sects and religious movements. Slovenian "liberalism" is far from being only a political orientation but it is world view with all the characteristics of an intolerant proselytizing (anti)religious movement. Such aggressive and abusive post-communist "liberalism" condemns all other world views to the private sphere and occupies the public sphere itself as the only legitimate world view.

Ideologically the mentality of the Slovenian people has not been changing consistently in the recent years. The important change occurred only regarding the Slovenian relationship to the Yugoslav federation that has resulted in the independence of the Slovenian state. But there has been no significant majority asking for a change of the political regime. Democracy was apparently accepted by the former communist party and its youth. It has allowed them to stay in power and keep it almost as effectively as before the institution of the pluralistic political system. According to Dr. Bucar, one of the founders of the Slovenian state, "Slovenian liberalism is a compensation for our communism." Indeed, Slovenian communists converted mostly to a special kind of hybrid liberalism which has no common ground with western liberalism. This is so because it keeps many elements of Slovenian communist myths, ideology, metaphysical materialism, and politics combined with a free market and capitalism. One of its most salient characteristics is a virulent anti-Catholicism.

Through the lens of their ideology Slovenian "liberals" see the Catholic Church as a political power and its only real dangerous political rival because until recently they have succeeded in neutralizing all emerging democratic opposition and preventing it from organizing itself efficiently. So, in their eyes it is only the Catholic Church which could be potentially politically dangerous because it is well organized, independent, and has some influence and esteem among people.

This view supported by an appropriate "political" action is possible only because our "liberals" do not yet distinguish different levels in society where the action of the Catholic Church and of religion generally speaking is legitimate and where it is not. The Catholic Church proclaims clearly that it has neither the intention nor the desire to become an established state Church or "an adviser of the king." On the other side it is not interested in acting on the political level, neither as a political party nor by influencing one or more of them. It constantly tries to keep an equidistant relation to all political parties. Nevertheless, it is not easy to stick to such a position when parties with totalitarian roots, ideology, and pedigree continue with their anti-democratic and anti-religious ideology and praxis.

One of the most obviously unacceptable ideas and claims is that religion and especially the Catholic Church should be a strictly private thing. One aspect of this "liberal" strategy --I mention it because it is linked to the context of proselytizing--is the fact of supporting and favoring the new sects and religious movements. Such an attitude has taken several forms. New religious groups have no difficulties in presenting themselves and their beliefs in public schools, which is strictly forbidden to the Catholic Church. There is practically no other media than the liberal-communist provenance. In it the Catholic Church is unjustly treated and has no means to reply, while the new religious groups have many opportunities to present themselves in a very positive light through these media. The Catholic Church does not protest against these new religious groups and their presence in the public sphere. It only

denounces all these manipulations of the "liberals" who misuse the State for their narrow political and ideological goals.

Paradoxically, in contrast with its mainstream politics against the Catholic Church and with some political realism and pragmatism the communist-"liberal" government has been showing signs of interest to find some kind of *modus vivendi* with the Catholic Church. There has been a special commission charged to produce an arrangement between the State and the Catholic Church. But this commission has produced nothing in four years because of the lack of political will. Nevertheless, these vain negotiations have become an excellent pretext for the new and furious attacks on the Catholic Church by both atheists and new religious groups.

With this political and ideological background in mind it is possible to understand the opposite frustrations of all religious communities regarding religious politics of the Slovenian communist-"liberal" government. It is a pity that religious groups do not see that Slovenian "liberalism" is far from being only a political orientation but it is their opposite and rival world view with all the characteristics of an intolerant proselytizing (anti)religious movement. The only difference between that kind of post-communist proselytizing liberalism and classical religious proselytizing nowadays is that this movement abuses the State and the money of taxpayers. It does so in order to spread its own ideas and to control and oppress others, especially the largest among them--the Catholic Church. Such aggressive and abusive post-communist "liberalism" condemns all other world views to the private sphere and occupies the public sphere by itself as the only legitimate world view. In this specific Slovenian case one may observe how one world view manipulates the others, provokes the divisions and animosities among them to master them easier. All religious groups, except the Catholic Church, have fallen into this ancient trap of *divide et impera* and, therefore, became a silent helper in the conservation of non-pluralist, non-democratic, and uniform social climate and relations.

3. Religious groups as members of civil society

I believe that the place of religious groups is not at the State and political levels, but they have to be public in the third sphere of institutionalized social life which is the civil society. Their public task is first of all to be active in the construction of this civil society which did not exist during communism and is still more or less non-existent nowadays. In this field religious groups may be helpful in ethical formation. They may be the places of gathering isolated individuals together and they may boost the development of different kinds of solidarity. And, last but not least, in the era of nihilism they permit their members to discover the meaning and value of life anew.

In the Slovenian case, I see another important problem which should be mentioned. Observing the relationship between religious groups in Slovenia, it is impossible to abstract it from questions such as the question of cultural identity of a small ethnicity (there are about two million Slovenians). What is the role of the national State in preserving cultural heritage and identity in a case like Slovenia? What is the place that can still legitimately be held by the traditional main stream religion in these processes without harming the principle of the equality of all citizens and the neutrality of the State?

These questions certainly are not the questions of western democracies which have established their national and cultural identities long time ago, but they seem to be inevitable for small nations of central Europe, and, maybe, for other countries where there is no clear line of demarcation between culture and religion. I am not suggesting that there is any satisfying existent model; just the opposite. I believe that none of the currently existent models is acceptable for modern society because they are remains of the traditional type of society. Nonetheless, the ethnic or national culture has a decisive anthropological importance and value and it could not be ignored by religious believers living in it and from it.

The "problem of proselytizing" in Slovenia reopens, in my view, some crucial questions about the

Slovenian society and its organization. We should learn many things from Western societies on the one hand, but on the other hand we cannot blindly copy them and we have to invent our own way of life according to our proper identity and strict respect of the human rights and democratic pluralism.