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BE SALT ON EARTH: CAN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN CROATIA?

By **Julijana Mladenovska-Tešija**

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Editor's Note: *Julijana Tešija uses a recent controversial event in Croatia as a window through which to analyze and reflect on the nature of evangelical engagement with those who differ from them.*

Battles without the Face of Christ?

December 1, 2013. Croatians voted in favor of defining marriage in the constitution as a “union of a man and a woman,” a move initiated by the Roman Catholic group “In the Name of the Family” and criticized by opponents as discrimination against homosexuals. The month before, the Croatian media (November 12, 2013) informed the public that Roman Catholics, Christian Orthodox, and Protestants, as well as Jews and Muslims should unite and called their believers to support the referendum and protect marriage in the Croatian constitution.¹

The clergy and laity of all faiths in Croatia were united as never before against the right of a sexual minority to marry, and the whole event was considered a victory. At one point I asked a sister-in-faith why she felt so angry while talking about gay rights and the issue of the

¹ See “Katolici, pravoslavci, protestanti, židovi i muslimani zajedno pozivaju: Izidite na referendum i zaštitite brak Ustavom,” by IKA (Catholics Information Agency), November 13, 2013, on Bitno.net: <http://www.bitno.net/vijesti/hrvatska/izidite-na-referendum-i-zastitite-brak-ustavom/>

referendum. What she said shocked me: “Because they started it,” and “because they were the first to attack us with lies and call us conservative and stupid.” She was not wrong. The human-rights associations and gay and lesbian groups in Croatia were severe in their attacks on Christians and the idea of the referendum. The reason I was shocked was because I heard this argument coming from the mouth of a Christian. In my mind, we should make all the difference in the world—we should be the salt and be strong both in evangelizing as well as in loving. And what I felt strongly about the referendum was that despite the victory, we lost our “flavor”: we lost our Christ face.

Just a few months before, on July 20, Pope Francis asked an intriguing question: “If someone is gay and searches for the Lord and has a good will, who am I to judge?” He proposed this view “as a call to Roman Catholic clergy in many countries to speak up and protest when gay men or lesbian women are arrested or discriminated by the authorities of their countries.”² Earlier, Pope Francis also commented on the Argentinean government’s support for a gay marriage bill, urging people against naivety. According to him, what states intend while passing this kind of bill is not only a “simple political fight” but also “an attempt to destroy God’s plan.”³ At first glance, these two statements seem hard to reconcile, but a common assumption links them together: we should state our beliefs and defend them but should never forget that on the “other side” is a fellow human being who might be also seeking for God.

But how should we do it? How should we fight the battle for the kingdom of God on earth against the principalities and the powers, without turning our head away from our flesh-and-blood neighbors, and instead showing the loving face of Christ? Why did evangelicals in

² “‘Not Afraid of Reality’: Pope Praised for New Stance on Gays,” *Spiegel Online International*, July 30, 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/human-rights-groups-praise-pope-francis-for-new-stance-on-gay-priests-a-913833.html>

³ “Pope Francis on Gay Marriage, Unmarried Mothers . . . and Journalists,” *The Guardian*, March 13, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/13/pope-francis-quotations-by-him-about-him>.

Croatia react this way, and how can we engage with others who differ from us in their values, religion, ethnicity, or opinions?

Can Evangelicals Make the Difference?

Evangelicals in Croatia are one of several minority churches recognized by the state. They are considered a “fusion of two leading Christian movements in the 20th and 21st centuries,” namely, evangelical and Pentecostal. While the first focuses on “the Holy Scripture and the Bible as the full authority of Christian belief and living,” the second pays greater attention to “the Holy Spirit in the lives of the believers and the Christian community which implements the truths from the Bible in its everyday experience.”⁴ The same source states that there are around forty Evangelical Pentecostal Churches in Croatia with more than 2,000 believers. The highest spiritual and ruling body is the Council of the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Croatia. Out of the total of 4,284,889 inhabitants of Croatia, evangelicals make up less than 0.3 percent, even though we are included in the group of “Protestant churches,” which, according to the 2011 census, is 14,653 (in comparison, 3,697,143 or 86 percent declared as Roman Catholics; 190,143 or 4.3 percent as Orthodox Christians; 62,977 or 1.5 percent as Muslims; and 12,961 as Other Christians).⁵

Our minority status, however, does not necessarily coincide with the quantity or quality of evangelicals’ political and social impact. We were even smaller in numbers when we finally signed the Agreement with the State of Croatia on “Issues of Joint Interest” in 2002 after several years of serious pressure was applied to different high government officials in order to have our

⁴ “Croatia (Evangelical Pentecostal Church) – Participating Member” webpage on the World Assemblies of God Fellowship website: <http://www.worldagfellowship.org/fellowship/countries/croatia> (accessed January 9, 2014).

⁵ Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2012: <http://www.dzs.hr> (accessed January 9, 2014).

position and rights in society recognized. Another example is *Agape*—an Association of the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Croatia founded in 1991—as a response to people’s suffering during the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. At a time when churches predominantly chose a side based on ethnicity (the Roman Catholic Church supported Croats, the Serbian Orthodox Church supported Serbs), a small group of evangelical enthusiasts from Croatia led by Peter Kuzmič, a renowned theologian and human rights activist, created one of the first humanitarian relief organizations that supported all people regardless of their ethnicity. “When you believe in the universality of Christ’s love, you believe in internationality and interethnicity of the redeemed community,” says Dr. Kuzmič, who has been quoted by Chip Zimmer as stressing the role of the evangelicals as “bridge builders” between Muslims, Croats, and Serbs.⁶ Last but not least is the example of the Evangelical Theological Faculty founded in Osijek in 1972 as an evangelical and interdenominational educational institution where both students and staff come from different countries and ethnic backgrounds.

Several characteristics make evangelicals in Croatia (and other parts of former Yugoslavia) different and unique. The churches are ethnically mixed: they gather people of different origins and backgrounds (some churches were even established in war-torn areas) to be reconciled under the cross, to worship together as a “wonderful sign of God’s kingdom.”⁷ Believers share a similar religious experience—“feeling of the numinous”⁸—of being called by the Lord to join his church, which is strongly emphasized and considered vital for the church and

⁶ Chip Zimmer, “Turning Enemies into Friends: An Inside Look at the Life and Passions of Peter Kuzmic,” available at The Peacemaker website: <http://www.peacemaker.net/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=khLUJ3PHKuG&b=6131017&ct=8648095¬oc=1> (accessed January 13, 2014), and ETS/AGAPE Report, “Evangelical Theological Seminary and Agape Ministries,” on Europe Missions of the National Presbyterian Church website: <http://npceurope.org/index.cfm?main=ETSKuzmic> (accessed January 13, 2014).

⁷ Peter Kuzmic, from Zimmer, “Turning Enemies into Friends.”

⁸ See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Cambridge University Press. 1923).

its sustainability and growth.⁹ They also share the four distinctive aspects of evangelical faith: conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism, and activism, which form a “quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism.”¹⁰ So, what went wrong at the referendum? Why did evangelicals act the same way as the others and fail to embody a crucicentric witness to those with whom we disagreed?

To make the issue clear: I do not intend to say that the voting should have been any different. Every one of us faced the choice to vote in accordance with his/her beliefs, and hopefully after being in a room with a closed door, praying to the Father who sees all but is unseen. What I want to highlight is that in the months prior to and during the referendum, I heard churches and church leaders from all sides telling us loud and clear what we are and how we should think and vote on the referendum. I also heard clergy praying and calling laypersons to join in the prayer for “victory on the referendum.”¹¹ At one point, the call and the prayer seemed so loud that I had the feeling that in all that fighting to prove who was right and who was wrong, we missed asking the Lord for his words of guidance. On the top of it all, we became engaged in aggressive rhetoric, in an earthly battle in which we made a clear division between our love for God and our love for humanity, neighbor and foe, which Jesus never did.

Analysis of Evangelical Response

In light of all this, three things seemed to be lacking, which might prove to be our weaknesses in general: (1) we tend to nurture conflict avoidance instead of openly addressing the

⁹ These findings correspond to T. Rainer and E. Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 63, 68.

¹⁰ David Bebbington, quoted in Carl Trueman, *The Real Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2011), 14.

¹¹ Throughout Croatia prayers were organized for the “success,” “victory,” and “support” of the referendum. See <http://www.tportal.hr> or <http://www.dnevnik.hr>, <http://www.croative.net>, <http://www.hu-benedikt.hr>, <http://www.dubrovniknet.hr>, etc.

real-life issues; (2) we tend to avoid open dialogue that allows diverse perspectives to be heard; and (3) we tend to neglect nurturing loving relationship with those of differing groups.

1. Nurturing conflict-avoidance philosophy

It is my belief that one of the key issues as to why we, as evangelicals, joined the herd and failed to model Christ's love to those with whom we disagreed is our tendency to avoid talking about conflicting issues within the church. We have sermons about different problems of today (drugs, sex, sexual abuse, homosexuality, home/gender violence); different pastors propose different interpretations—though similar solutions—to these issues. Yet at times their proposed solutions seem distant from real-life problems; they are moral propositions or dogmas that should be obeyed without posing questions regarding their application. The Thomas and Kilmann grid, which highlights different conflict resolution tools and their success in application, shows that avoidance is a lose-lose position since it does not address the issue at hand. The authors claim it typically works for minor issues and nonrecurring conflicts, but it seems unable to provide a good response for more serious matters and therefore other approaches to conflict resolution might be more useful.¹²

2. Lack of open dialogue that involves different perspectives

The Bible does not offer a comprehensive or a prescriptive answer to the question of how Christians should relate to those different from us. However, it does provide orientation indicators for Christians—both in their engagement in interfaith or faith-secular dialogue as well

¹² See in more length, Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann, *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (Mountain View, CA: CPP, Inc./Xicom Incorporated, 1974). An overview of their model can be found on <http://www.kilmanndiagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki> (accessed January 13, 2014).

as for interchurch dialogue. This dialogue should provide insight into the Holy Scripture (theological input), offer prayer for God's guidance, and also provide examples from life that grounds biblical teaching in real-life situations. Lack of open dialogue creates distrust, which is defined as an expectation that the motives, intentions, and behaviors of another person are sinister and harmful to one's own interests.¹³ Lewicki, Tomlinson, and Gillespie (renowned scholars in management, negotiation, trust development, and conflict management processes) also confirm that distrust usually causes us to take steps that reduce our vulnerability in an attempt to protect our interests; thus our distrust of others is likely to evoke a competitive (as opposed to cooperative) orientation that stimulates and exacerbates conflict.¹⁴

3. Nurturing loving relationships with our neighbors and/ or foes

During the campaign for the referendum, while the Roman Catholics were loud and overwhelmingly present in all media, our evangelical churches were basically silent. Apart from the statement of support to the referendum initiative, there was also an interview on the Croatian National Television with Danijel Berković, a theologian and representative of the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Croatia.¹⁵ In the interview, he rightly stressed that the referendum was a reaction to partocracy and to the lack of proper public dialogue in Croatia, and warned that it might, in turn, initiate an avalanche of similar initiatives.¹⁶ So the question remains: why did we (as a minority faith) join an initiative that might open a Pandora's box of future similarly

¹³ See Roy J. Lewicki, Edward C. Tomlinson, and Nicole Gillespie, "Models of Interpersonal Trust Development: Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Evidence, and Future Directions," *Journal of Management* 32 (2006): 991; available at <http://jom.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/32/6/991>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 998.

¹⁵ Duhovni izazovi, November 23, 2013.

¹⁶ See "What Is the Type of Dialogue in Croatia," on the Evangelical Pentecostal Church of Croatia website: <http://www.epc.hr/hr/aktualno/vijesti/kakav-je-nacin-razgovora-u-hrvatskoj.530.html> (accessed January 20, 2014).

coercive initiatives and laws against another minority, and why we did not do anything to enhance true dialogue—even dialogue that includes our “foes”?

In the Quest for Answers

At one point, Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was in the Law of Moses. Mark states that he replied, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:28–31 NIV). In the Sermon on the Mount he expands on this to specifically include loving and praying for one’s enemy (Matt 5:43–45).

In light of Jesus’ teaching, as Christ followers, is it not our obligation to unite our love for our Lord with love for our neighbor? Is it not our task to see our neighbors and foes, as well as our brothers/sisters, as children of God and love them too? We are surprised when others see us as conservative, aggressive, and narrow-minded. Are we aware that how we regard the Other (those who oppose our views or disagree with us) reflects our beliefs and how we see and love our Lord?

There are some 613 commandments of different kinds and for different people and situations in the Old Testament.¹⁷ But Jesus highlights love for God and neighbor as the pinnacle of all these commandments—in fact, love for God is inextricably intertwined with love for humanity and is the cornerstone of what it means to be a Christian. Our Lord is saying that we honor God’s love for us if we love each other, and we are forgiven and reconciled after repenting of our sins (remembering our own sinfulness, Matthew 4 and 5). He is asking us to love our

¹⁷ “A List of the 613 Mitzvot (Commandments),” on the Judaism 101 website: <http://www.jewfaq.org/613.htm> (accessed January 9, 2014).

enemies and to love them creatively (walking another mile, helping when no one else will), in sincerity and discernment without judgment (Matthew 6 and 7), and with sensitivity and compassion.

The Bible also teaches our posture as we approach our neighbors. For instance, Matthew 18:15–17 details the method of confronting someone who has sinned against you; James 1:19 and Proverbs 15:1 highlight listening and being gentle while slow to anger. We should expect differences to arise both within the church and between the church and society. Our response to these conflicts needs to conform to Christ’s teachings.¹⁸

Concluding Remarks

How can we ensure that church communication based on a dialogue of diverse perspectives does not remain abstract, or even worse, merely turned into a moral imposition as was illustrated by this recent event in Croatia? We can do so by making dialogue an everyday method of communication in the church as well as between the church and society in general.

During almost five months of campaigning for the referendum, I heard no single call to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters to come to us and talk (or us to them, for that matter!). We lacked an open hand and a loving face calling them to Christ. We responded the same way as they did: in anger and with a desire to win. We supported a coercive law on purely religious grounds, and we were part of the majority that imposed their religious views on others and restricted the civil liberties of our fellow citizens. Whether we should have entered into the battle

¹⁸ The life of the triune God is a helpful model to consider. See, for instance, the model proposed by Miroslav Volf in *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). He explores the relationship between persons and community in Christian theology and finds the foundation for the Christian church in the Trinity, which is viewed as union in diversity. Volf argues that the Word and the Spirit are distinct but inseparable from the Speaker of the Word and Breather of the Spirit, and no divine “person”—neither Father, nor Son, nor the Spirit—ever acts independently in any activity.

with the state is another issue for analysis. But whether we should have gone about it in this particular manner is a question that should be raised now and always.

In these kinds of situations, Thomas and Kilmann first propose compromise as a solution, but second, and even better, collaboration. While the first looks for a “mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties,” the second “involves an attempt to work with others to find some solution that fully satisfies their concerns.”¹⁹ This can be done by applying open dialogue that can defuse tensions and keep situations from escalating. It can also promote understanding of different positions and offer resolutions to conflicting matters and reconciliation between conflicted parties. But above all, it can bring those who seek Christ closer to him as they witness his love, kindness, firmness, and gentleness reflected in ourselves. This is especially true in times when prejudice and hatred are all too common, when extreme views dominate the understanding and incite identity-based appeals, and especially when politicians use divisiveness as a strategy to win. Is this recent situation an example of our being drawn into the political rather than a faith-related battle? Only the future will tell.

¹⁹ Thomas and Kilmann, *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*.