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Some Social Expectations of Christians in Yugoslavia
with Primary Emphasis on the Protestant Churches
by N. Gerald Shenk

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Yugoslavia is one of many Marxist states, and not exactly typical, but its complexity (with six main nationalities, numerous languages, two distinct alphabets, etc.) can be creative and instructive. The history of cultural, political and religious tensions has required a deliberate policy of the state toward organized religious affairs in the new socialist order since 1945. This sphere of social reality has become the subject of reflection and serious academic investigation, especially since the mid-1960s, when the first doctoral degrees in sociology of religion began to be awarded in Yugoslav universities.

Here is an outline of the primary aspects of the religious inheritance, some effects of socialist experience on religious communities, the contemporary concept of the religious sphere, developments in the basic attitudes between church and state, and recent speculation about prospects for the relationship between religious communities and the state, based on social expectations between them.

The complexity of the religious inheritance in Yugoslavia is far older than the struggle against occupation by Hitler's Germany and its allies in 1941. Ancient cultural differences between East and West, Greece and Rome, antedate even the arrival of the Slavic tribes in these southern reaches of their migrations during the seventh century A.D. But religious variations soon came to provide the symbolism for ethnic differences which fostered and eventually exacerbated an ongoing tension among these several peoples.

In its positive aspects, the religious legacy is widely recognized as including priceless contributions in culture, education, literacy, art, architec-
ture and the development of values, as well as handling functions of the passages of life and the moral instruction of the populace. The continuity and development of European civilization are rightfully attributed to the care taken by religious institutions through the centuries.

Yet while the cultural indebtedness to the preservers of tradition is acknowledged, the moral bankruptcy of religious practice had come to a climax just prior to and during the struggle for national liberation during World War II. The worst fruits of Constantinian Christendom in this situation were the marriage of religious allegiance to the most rabid forms of nationalism, and the tragic record of forced conversions, especially during moments of political opportunity when one religious community sought to gain the advantage over others. The forces of revolutionary change could only regard the church system as one more bureaucracy, a tax burden, an insatiable land holder, demanding the right to dictate both public and private morality, reserving to itself the privilege of advising courts and legislature in its own interest, exemptions for its functionaries from public duties such as military. At the slightest encroachment against these interests, the established churches did not hesitate to lobby, pressure and threaten dire sanctions against decision-makers who failed to toe the line. And in the rare event that these measures were insufficient, the religious establishment could and all too frequently did resort to stirring up latent nationalist intolerance of others in the political union to a frenzy of fanaticism and even fratricide. The most recent tragic examples are no more antiquated than World War II, when Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Muslims, Jews and gypsies all perished in atrocities condoned and sometimes even led by religious officials. Such abuses met with genuine popular rejection, and the fate of the religious establishments after the war was justly linked to the demand for retribution against particular segments of the hierarchies, those individuals whose compromises had been most obvious and flagrant.¹

What method of sociological investigation could demonstrate the effects on religious life of some thirty years' experience with the Yugoslav experiment in self-management socialism? This work has yet to be done, and the observations which follow can only be tentative and speculative in character.

First it must be noted that after centuries of complicity between religion and society, this is the first deliberately secular state in Yugoslav experience, one

¹ For a cautious but intriguing account of one such process see Stella Alexander, "The Trial of Archbishop Stepinac," Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945 (Cambridge, 1979), 95-120.
in which no single religious community dominates public affairs at the expense of other groups.

For Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, Adventist and other small groups ("sects," in sociological terminology, though the term is avoided in public discourse in Yugoslavia today because of its pejorative theological overtones), this meant a sudden new constitutional equality before the law, a dramatic improvement over their situation in "old Yugoslavia," the monarchy between World Wars I & II, when zealous priests could burn down the meetinghouses of such "heretics" with impunity and even with the complicity of the legal authorities in the old Constantinian order.

The new socialist order set itself vigorously to the disestablishment of religion. This had substantial economic consequences, proportional to the privileged economic role that the established churches (specifically the Orthodox and Catholic Churches) had enjoyed in the earlier arrangement. In the development of church-state relations (see below), this first period was accordingly fraught with a great deal of tension and frustration on the part of suddenly "impoverished" church leaders. But land reform itself was not a new idea. Even in "old Yugoslavia" such measures had proceeded with popular support, but the religious land holdings alone had remained exempt from agrarian reform, leaving the church as the last of the huge feudal land holders. Now church estates also were carved up by reform.

Many church facilities have in fact been returned to religious use in the meantime, but those possessions that had served solely as income producers for economic security have remained in the service of the broader community. In retrospect, even some people in church circles admit that these measures, difficult though their impact was at first, have in fact served to liberate the church from some involvements that had made it a burden to society, rather than a servant.

Given the reluctance of the large traditional religious communities to dissociate themselves from identification with nationalism (that is, the ethnocentric fervor which fans existing tensions into conflagrations during times of social upheaval), the broader society has taken upon itself the task of policing inter-religious tensions. A sad history here is gradually being overcome, with considerable support for efforts to build positive relationships among the different religious communities.

With the restructuring of the relationship between church and state has come a much sharper definition of what is religious and what is not. This is in part a

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2 This distinction made explicit for example, by the leading sociologist Vuko Pavićević, Sociologija religije (Beograd: Bigz, 19802), 329-330.
natural consequence of general secularization in modern Europe, but it is also a matter for specific legislation—for example, regulating the types of activity which constitute proper religious rituals at the graveside.\(^3\) One apologist has described the developments of such policies under the caption, "The Abuse of Religion Limits Freedom of Religious Confession."\(^4\)

This adjustment to changed conditions has not been painless for the traditional religious communities, but some people have seen in this process a purification of the church's involvement in the world, particularly where that involvement had been quite compromised in establishment Christendom.

At the interface with broader society, then, the proper sphere of religious activity is regarded as consisting of public gatherings, open and announced, in facilities which conform to ordinary building and zoning regulations; religious instruction for all who voluntarily seek it; training for religious leaders in educational facilities; religious publication; and the traditional rites of passage (at birth, marriage, death), providing religious rituals for all who continue to seek these services.

In some spheres of social activity society has had such negative experience with religious involvement that it has clearly rejected those ministrations; they are now by definition beyond the pale of appropriate religious activity. These include the self-appointed role as conscience to society and pontification on public policies in the arts, culture, education and public morality. Particularly anathematized are any and all cases where organized religion is abused as a cover for political opposition to the existing social order.

Furthermore, no role at all is seen for the church as an institution to mediate even for its own adherents in their obligations and responsibilities to the wider society. Believers must participate in political affairs as citizens, not first as members of a special subgroup in society. Nor can believers delegate their political responsibilities to their religious leaders, who would then because of their position in the religious hierarchy seek out parallel recognition and duties in public affairs. The church, then, is not a recognized lobby in the business of the wider society. No religious leader holds office by virtue of ecclesiastic prerogative.

Neither may the church curry public favor through competition by establishing alternatives to public systems of social welfare. Hospitals, orphanages and schools are public enterprises, not religious.

\(^3\) The Law on Funeral Activities is designed to prevent priests from misappropriating the situation with propaganda at the expense of a captive audience—the unbelieving relatives, that is. See Ivan Cvitković, Bilješke o Religiji (Sarajevo: Oslabodjenje, 1980), 87.

\(^4\) Ibid., 109-113.
While the full range of religious attitudes toward the state has found expression at various times and circumstances, several writers have noted a distinct pattern of progression in the basic attitude of the major churches toward the state, during the post-war period: (1) The socialist system is treated as an evil which must be continuously attacked. (2) The system is regarded as acceptable, on condition that it adjust its relationship with the churches, in favor of the interests of the churches. (3) The system is regarded with express tolerance and loyalty. (4) The system is given open verbal support. (5) The system is given open practical support, manifest in action.5

The all-encompassing nature of the world views at stake in these relations engenders much emotion and sometimes friction. Strong interests on both (or several) sides do upon occasion come into direct conflict, even within the framework of loyalty to the task of building socialism. At the practical level, some points of contact and tension include influence on the youth; relative level of attendance at party versus church functions (especially in the villages, where such comparisons are most obvious); control of the means of communication; and the ideological direction of education. At the local level, actual practice of political authorities and church functionaries in fact varies widely. Where the Constantinian tradition of jockeying for power persists between them, anomalies and abuses have occurred on both sides. But where cooperation is the basic mode, patience has accomplished a modus vivendi which has shown marked improvement.

To draw the contrast to its sharpest, we can outline two basic clusters of values. The elementary themes which form the backbone of socialist morality are recited in every context, built into a new consciousness of unity, brotherhood, loyalty, diligence, self-defence, resourcefulness and intergroup tolerance. Long after the short-lived sway of "socialist realism" in the arts, this deliberate value-orientation does appear in school curricula, popular media, and even in entertainment.

Yet the unholy mixture of religion and power, on the other hand, is remembered as the direct counter-example--of disintegration, fratricide, treachery, indolence, engendering dependence, reliance on professional hierarchy, and perhaps as a sectarian brotherhood always much narrower than society itself, and thus a commonality at the expense of other subgroups.

There is a new recognition that religious activity when purged of power and nationalism may eventually have a positive contribution to make in the context of

5 Esad Ćimić, Socijalističko društvo i religija (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 19702), 21.
a more fully self-managed socialist society. But in the meantime the philosophers of religion are admitting that some individuals (alienated and neurotic) have needs which continue to be met by the mystery and ritual of the religious traditions, as a private but not a social phenomenon.

Until recently, this view of religion as a necessary hangover from earlier societies has been predominant. With cautious and discreet supervision, such activities could be prevented from reverting to previous, less cooperative forms. If experience in other socialist countries be taken as a guide, there would even be a slight probability that the religious communities might again thoroughly align themselves with their society as to become in a new way its handmaidens.

The social scope of traditional religion truly has been diminished, however, in recent decades. In recent social research, neither theism nor atheism but religious indifference is the broadest category among young people. And there is little evidence available to indicate that traditional religion is being transformed into the new liberated humanist, anti-authoritarian forms which might one day overcome alienation and neuroses on the lines of Erich Fromm's speculation, for example. One Yugoslav sociologist comments that such a development would signify a radical historical and cultural discontinuity, a unique form of transcendence which will bear little resemblance to its former cousins (present and past expressions).6

Like the other members of modern Yugoslav society, Christians look to the society for the full range of essential services: health facilities, education, employment, economic security, social planning, etc. The church is not and cannot be regarded as an alternative to any of these. Beyond this, there are the symbols and meaning systems for an identity broader than the parochial ethnic or confessional ones of the past, a world view and explanation which provide links with structures beyond the Yugoslav context, notably in the non-aligned movement and the Third World.

Yugoslav society has found it in its own interest to develop a true sensitivity to the ramifications of public policies for religious communities, establishing commissions and institutes, though not an actual dialogue, in the field of religious research. These studies are closely attended only by Catholic scholars thus far in the religious communities. Curiously enough, it seems that for all the ubiquity of Marxist teaching, Christians, especially Orthodox and Protestants, have invested far less energy in the study of society around them than the Marxists have put into the study of religious behavior and commitment.

6 Esad Ćimić, interviewed in "Pitanja" (Zagreb: Rkssoh, 1980; Numbers 4 and 5), 29.
It is instructive to note which indicators the social scientists identify in studying belief and intensity of participation. In a region predominantly Catholic, these researchers selected the following as fundamentals of the faith for verification: belief about God, Jesus Christ, miracles, origin of moral norms, origin of the earth, origin of man, concepts of life after death. But reports about items of belief are not in themselves adequate measures of religious commitment. Thus, participation in religious activities is also surveyed. Prayer at home, celebration of religious holidays, wearing religious symbols, baptism, attendance at religious instruction and reading religious publications are of primary interest here.

It is not possible on this occasion to cite nor to evaluate the broad range of literature related to the question of whether religion is withering away. As far as public policy is concerned, it was recognized almost from the outset that the withering away of religion is a process which cannot be forced. Administrative measures of harassment directed against believers very easily backfire and prove counterproductive. Instead of weakening the religious community, direct opposition by the state tends to strengthen it. "The threat to religious freedoms always strengthens the need for religious experiences."

Not unusual is the lament of a young parish priest: "As soon as people stop dying for the faith, it starts dying out." Accordingly, the authorities have consistently frustrated the natural (?) religious desire for martyr-heroes. Quite delicate treatment has been accorded even the most cantankerous of religious critics.

The question of the future of religion in socialist conditions is often treated with much wishful thinking and dogmatic declaration by both religious and political officials. Less heat and more light is to be found in the work of some social scientists, who demonstrate an awareness of the dynamic process of secularization and "atheization," the consequent "worldly religion" and secular idolatries which characterize the consumer society. The need for transcendence has not escaped their attention, and some are asserting that precisely due to this element, traditional religion is in fact richer in human experience and depth of meaning than the newer, manipulative secular religions. This, however, is not a claim that transcendence in the future must be religious.


8 Alexander, 174-177, on the case of the Orthodox Vicar-Bishop Varnava, a professed pacifist.
Do Protestant pietism or nonestablished free-church groups have a role to play in these developments and transitions within socialist Yugoslavia? One form of Christianity seems roughly to fit both the pietist tradition and the Marxist tolerance of religious activity. It is characterized by a quiet, nonspectacular system which fosters devotion, obedience and a personal faith, one which does not force itself aggressively upon society or neighbors, contents itself with an otherworldly hope, little concerned with its own social reality in this fallen world.

Such a formula has been selected by many sectarian groups. Having begun perhaps as small-scale social movements in times of social unrest, they have for the most part been reduced to a holding operation of self-maintenance, on a diet of minor prophets and apocalypse.

From the standpoint of Marxist philosophy, it must be admitted that this narrow expression of Christianity will never threaten the critical conclusion that religion is for weaklings, cowards and psychological basket cases. Nor will it ever atone positively for the tragic history bequeathed by Christendom in these lands. Nor in its passive disengagement and tame withdrawal will such Christianity ever add its unique note of metanoia and shalom to the cacophony of secular values around it. But there remains a question of more than speculative significance, whether the current societal tolerance for religious activity is much broader than the earlier much criticized function of religion as an opiate of the people. In other words, if it keeps the people contented, such religion is no more dangerous to society than soccer, for example.

And from the standpoint of New Testament faith or a radical Anabaptist critique of Christendom, this heritage of pious terminology and spiritual allegory will never measure up to the fullness of Christ either. The obvious result is little more than a collection of pious individuals, whose whole interaction is directed to fostering and preserving private relationships with a distant God Almighty, mediated by a carpenter's son turned sweet shepherd of wandering sheep.

This evaluation must not be understood as a negation of true brothers and sisters in the faith, nor as a denial of the reservoir of truth mystically embodied in these quiet small communities. The incarnation of that truth as a present and social reality in this socialist context must be the greatest task which believers can set for themselves with the full range of freedom and responsibility available to them now.

One Yugoslav theologian evaluated the general situation of believers in socialist Europe along these lines:
Evangelical Christians in Eastern Europe are marked by a theology of the cross. They are not adherents of popular religion offering ready-made answers to the problems of their existence. Their Christian life has a depth of commitment and spirit of sacrifice going far beyond anything known as a response to the "cheap grace" or "prosperity gospel" popular in some segments of Western evangelicalism. High morals and exemplary living are the strongest testimony evangelicals in Eastern Europe present within their societies. Evangelical churches encourage their members to be loyal citizens and diligent workers. They know that the new social order and the high ideals of their society need the support of the "new man" whom only Christ can create. There is no fear for the future of the Church of Jesus Christ; its future does not depend upon the good will of worldly authorities and attitudes of temporal powers, but upon the sovereign Lord of History, the only Redeemer of mankind to whom they have pledged their allegiance.9

But this assessment is made with a realistic view of the problems and weakness faced by believers as well:

Lack of systematical theological training, coupled with external circumstances, often leads to an escapist eschatology that in turn justifies the Marxist accusation of alienation. Evangelical faith is often considered reactionary and is suspect as a remnant of the old order or an infiltration of Western influence. Unfortunately, religious activism in some East European countries is considered synonymous with political dissidence. Evident also in many places is a generation gap between bolder Christians with their forms of inner piety, lack of concern for larger social and human issues, and traditional ways of worship coupled with legalism as the norm of Christian life, and the more enthusiastic and better educated young people who are attracted to a more lively, innovative and reflective presentation of the Gospel. The evangelical establishment is more or less marked by a retreat from the world, forcing them into the position of only a tolerated and irrelevant minority.10

Two further weaknesses hamper the rise of authentic Christianity in these small circles, both imported like the theology from the West: 1) The pursuit of material well-being. There may be a connection here both with Wesley's lament about the "continual decline of pure religion" and with Marx's famed thesis on the withering away of religion when economic and social conditions of alienation are superseded. 2) Apathy, or spiritual indifference. As noted above, this phenomenon is on the increase. It may also have roots in the Constantinian tradition where society holds full responsibility for material and social order, while the religious professionals mediate all functions on the spiritual front. The traditions of lay activism, voluntarism and parachurch fervor so essential to North American Christendom have never taken root in Yugoslav soil.

10 Ibid., 82-83.
The import of the preceding analysis of religious reality in Yugoslav conditions may best be outlined with a series of concluding theses:

(1) Contemporary public policies toward religious communities may only be understood in the context of past abuses of religious privilege in conditions of established Christendom.

(2) True Christianity need not fear the piercing Marxist critique of that religious legacy, but instead has much to learn about the attitudes and engagements of authentic faith by studying its own social reality with as much diligence as the social scientists show in researching religious commitment.

(3) Trimmed of its temporal power functions, disestablished Christianity will not avail itself of methods which depend on institutions in direct competition with the programs of broader society (alternative hospitals, etc.).

(4) Both New Testament and Anabaptist expressions of the faith had more in common with these (worldly) powerless conditions than our own quite triumphal and established North American Christendom.

(5) Does the spread of our faith depend on fair weather at home and foul weather abroad? Some evangelism smacks of a power dynamic where the comfortable invite the weak to buy into a vision conditioned by sectarian greenhouses.

(6) Neither in our own society nor in others does authentic Christianity have a vested interest in the persistence of alienating conditions which foster an opiate religion of escape.

(7) Not the re-establishment of Christendom, but a deliberately secular society lends itself best to fostering responsible involvement by Christians in the needs and possibilities of the social reality where they are planted. Their faith must not be privatized nor organized into alternative and competing power structures, but must demonstrate a corporate reality of caring personalism available to and in the service of others in the broader society.