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## MARXISTS AND THE CHURCHES IN YUGOSLAVIA

by Paul Mojzes

Paul Mojzes (United Methodist) was born and educated in Yugoslavia where he had two years of Law School at Belgrade University before moving to the United States where he received the A.B. degree from Florida Southern College and Ph.D. in church history with emphasis on Eastern Europe from Boston University. He is professor of religious studies at Rosemont College and the writer of numerous studies on Eastern Europe. He is one of the vice chairpersons of CAREE and the editor of OPREE. He has frequently visited Eastern Europe, especially Yugoslavia.

### A. Purpose

The purpose of this article is to present the relationship between religion and Marxism in Yugoslavia. For practical purposes the term religion will be identified in this paper with institutional religion, namely Christian Churches and to a lesser degree Islam while the term Marxism will coincide with Yugoslav Communism. The paper will seek to describe the traditional initial mutual attitudes and then point out some changes which took place even though the traditional postures remained prevalent. First the attitude of the Marxists toward religion will be examined, then the attitude of religious people toward Marxism will be described. It should be pointed out that this is a general overview rather than a detailed analysis.<sup>1</sup>

### B. The Marxist Attitudes Toward Religion.

Since, 1936, with the ascent of Josip Broz-Tito to the leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, the Party's views on most important matters coincided with the Soviet, Stalinist views. This agreement lasted, with minor exception, beyond the time of the formal break between Tito and Stalin in 1948, since it was not easy to depart from firmly held ideological positions, especially when these were under attack by the Soviets for deviationism. Only in the middle 1950s did gradual changes take place which affected the treatment of religion.

The initial attitude of the Yugoslav Marxists toward religion was

the dogmatic Marxist interpretation of religion as an illusion and as a tool in the hands of the upper classes which retards the working class' willingness to mount revolutionary struggles. But among the top ideological and political leadership in the Communist Party before and after the war, there did not seem to be anyone who seriously analyzed religion, not even in order to attack it. No party leader produced a theoretical tract dealing with religion. Those who may have shared Lenin's bitterness toward religion did not do so openly, as it may have been considered inopportune in view of the fact that the rather traditionalist peasant and working population of Yugoslavia tended to adhere to their religion, in so far as religion was a very important source of national identification in multinational Yugoslavia.<sup>2</sup>

When World War II broke out and the Communist Party spearheaded the guerilla warfare against the Nazis and domestic collaborators, it was important for them not to alienate the religiously oriented peasants who made up the core of the Partisan forces. The few priests who joined the Partisans, even those who had in the meantime abandoned their religious convictions, provided whatever religious pastoral care they could.<sup>3</sup> But since most of the high clergy and the majority of the general clergy feared "godless" Communism and tended to either ally themselves with the de-facto rulers of the war-time period, or at least tended to acquiesce to it, the Communist Party came to the bitter conclusion that religion was antagonistic to their cause. After the war, when the spirit of revenge exploded furiously all of the churches were made to suffer for the atrocities which some clergy in the name of their religion<sup>4</sup> perpetrated during the war (e.g. mass murder of those who would not convert, or total destruction of villages of other religionists, vicious propaganda, etc.) It is anyone's guess whether the overall post-revolutionary policies of the Communist Party toward religion would have been any different had the wartime events taken a different shape, but the general animosity of the churches against the Partisans could not have helped matters.

In the post-war period the attitude of the Communist government toward the churches went through five stages:

1. All-out hostility (1944-1953)

2. De-escalation, gradual normalization of relations (1953-1962)
3. Increased toleration and permission to work within fairly liberal confines (1962-1967)
4. Attempts at dialogue and fair scholarly study of religion, but still with continued remnants of constraint upon churches (1967-1972).
5. Retrenchment. Government pressure to limit the dialogue (1972 to the present).

One should not imagine that these are sharply delineated stages and that there is no overlap. Even though one may observe a general progression from the first to the fourth state, even at the height of liberalization in 1970-1972 there were still localized outbursts of hostility and suspicion and attempts to limit religious activities, which persist till the present. One may describe the basic attitude toward religion as considering it a reactionary, illusory worldview which should be helped along in its inevitable demise. Religion is considered an alien element in socialism, equated with superstition and inconsistent with the scientific worldview. Church must be separated from the state and clergy stripped of their influence, particularly in the political and social fields. While freedom of religion is to be guaranteed constitutionally and legally, that freedom is understood only as the right to worship within church-buildings (outside of them only by special permits). Religion is to be relegated to the private sphere. Technically, believers are to be treated as equals, but not in their capacity as believers but only as citizens. In reality they are relegated to second-class citizenship, prevented from access to political and educational occupations and often seriously limited in other areas of life. Public media are not to be used by religious institutions, while attacks upon religion are freely permitted in such media with limited opportunity to reply. Since the 1960s the religious press has been allowed to function. From time to time certain of these publications have undertaken the task of defending their views, for which occasionally they have been banned from circulating that specific issue. One legal provision which can be handily used against religious people, or any other perceived enemies, is that they engaged in "hostile

anti-state propaganda" or that they are "working against the interest of the people."

The above attitudes are the main staple of the Communist position toward religion in other Eastern European countries and in a few of them they are still the primary response. But in Yugoslavia things started changing after the Soviet-Yugoslav dispute of 1948 and the rupture of cordial relations with other Eastern block nations. In its ideological attempts to find out what went wrong with Stalinism, the Yugoslav Communists repudiated certain Stalinistic methods, went back to their ideological sources, namely the writings of Marx and Engels, and started changing their posture toward religion as soon as they felt assured that the churches were not representing an active threat to the socialist order. For reasons that are too many to enumerate here, Yugoslav Communists granted a fair degree of religious autonomy<sup>6</sup> and are among the most liberal Eastern European Marxists in regard to religious policies today. It would be a vast exaggeration to say that there is true religious freedom in Yugoslavia, but on the other hand, remarkable latitude is allowed for the churches' work. That there is not more freedom is partially due to the disunity of the churches; in that respect, there is no parallel to the Polish situation.

From the middle of the 1960s a genuinely new attitude toward religion emerged among a limited number of Marxist scholars which provided a radically different alternative to the more tolerant yet suspicious attitude of Communists to religion as described above.<sup>7</sup> This alternative emerged among a few university professors whose teaching and books influence not only their students but also a larger segment of society, though one cannot say that their views have prevailed. Their notions were discussed in public and they did bring the onset of the Christian-Marxist dialogue in the late 1960s and an even greater permissiveness on part of certain officials in dealing with the churches.

The main protagonists of the new approach by Marxists toward religion were the professors Esad Ćimić of University of Sarajevo (later Zadar and Belgrade), Branko Bošnjak of Zagreb University, Zdenko Roter and Marko Kerševan of the University of Ljubljana, Srdjan Vrcan of Split

University, and Andrija Kresić, Belgrade University. A few less influential, nevertheless interesting thinkers added to the variety of views. Of the main thinkers, all but Branko Bošnjak, who is a philosopher, were sociologists. Bošnjak himself started as a critic of Christianity<sup>8</sup> but conceded that religion is unlikely to die out even under conditions of socialism, because he felt that there will always be those who out of fear of death will construe notions of life after death. His book engendered one of the very few public dialogues in March 1967 when he engaged the Roman Catholic theologian Mijo Škvorc.<sup>9</sup> In his later writings and even more in his personal behavior Bošnjak showed himself a genuine humanistic Marxist who is receptive to dialogue with Christians.

The sociologists travelled a different road. They started out with empirical, though still Marxist oriented studies of the concrete religious situation in Yugoslavia. This may not strike one as particularly revolutionary, but in fact it was a drastic departure from the previous propagandistic approach which assumed that the critique of religion was accomplished by Marx, Engels, and Lenin, and that there is no point in investigating a moribund phenomenon. In these empirical studies they departed from tendentious attacks on religion and came to see that socialism still engenders religious feelings (Ćimić) and that religion may serve some progressive social roles. Vatican II and the emergence abroad of theologians who were not ipso facto antagonistic to Marxism lead them to look for positive signs of religiosity (Roter and Kresić). Some of them concluded that religion was not about to die out, if ever. Others stated that one ought to apply non-ideological approaches to religion; if religion furthers the cause of the victory of the proletariat, the Communists ought to cooperate with such churches or people; if it works against the working class, religion should be combatted (Kerševan). Still others carried out careful local studies of religiosity and atheization, including the religiosity of the younger, and noted that the proletarian family background played a negligible role in secularization since most workers still followed religious practices, but that higher education fostered atheism (Vrcan). Ćimić noted that the atheization of society was not necessarily a blessing; it

brought about a moral vacuum. He urged that the state and the schools be humanistic and non-theistic, rather than anti-theistic.<sup>10</sup>

This altogether too brief summary<sup>11</sup> of the views of the Yugoslav Marxist thinkers will indicate to those familiar with the Eastern European Marxist views on religion that very few Marxists in other socialist societies developed such appreciative views of religion. The few thinkers who come to mind outside of Yugoslavia are the Czechs Milan Machovec and Vitezsláv Gardavský, the Pole Janusz Kuczynsky, and the Hungarian József Lukács. Regretably, after 1972, when the late President Tito decided to crack down on disturbances in the country and to end disunity in the Party, most of these thinkers found themselves, because of their participation in dialogue, their liberal views on religion, and their humanistic Marxist convictions, under a great deal of pressure. The pressure affected mostly their party membership and their job security, but they were also attacked in the press and other public forums. Many had to "lay low" in the post-1972 period, but most continued their publications though not their public dialogue with Christians (private contacts are being maintained more discretely). Fortunately, the Christian-Marxist dialogue in Yugoslavia had taken place primarily in written form so the new restrictions did not destroy it completely. The dialogue was always characterized by diversity of viewpoint both on the Christian and Marxist side. The Marxists appreciated the vast divergence of religious view in Yugoslavia and on the whole found some of the Roman Catholics most receptive and ready for dialogue, so that for all practical purposes the dialogue is one between liberal Roman Catholics and humanistic Marxists.

#### C. The Attitude of Religious People Toward Marxism

Prior to the end of World War II there were few religious people in Yugoslavia who leaned toward Marxism. Christian socialism did not seem to be an option, nor did Christians (as they do in Italy or Spain) join the Communist Party in any significant numbers. It is safe to say that most religious people, whether they were Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Muslim, Protestant, or Jews feared Communism.

Many religious people joined the Partisan struggle against the occupation forces but perceived the war primarily as one of liberation

rather than of social revolution. After the war they realized that they were in a communist society. Most of them did not like it! However, there were few means of showing their disapproval effectively since the Communist government at the outset used violence against real and potential enemies. The plurality of religions caused religious hatred and distrust which excluded any possibility of the religious groups making a common cause against Communism. The churches were at once placed on the defensive as they were accused of collaborating either with the pre-war royal government in exile (primarily the Serbian Orthodox) or with the pro-fascist regimes and enemies (primarily the Roman Catholic); the others were not influential anyhow. Some of these charges were true. It is also true that there were many backward and superstitious members and leaders in the churches.

The general range of attitudes toward Marxism by religious people includes a) antagonism, b) indifference, c) pragmatic accommodation, d) dialogue, e) critical acceptance, and f) syncretism and unquestionable support.<sup>12</sup> In Yugoslavia, the last option of the spectrum was not pursued by religious people. The government did not make any sustained efforts to elicit this alternative as did, for example, the Communists of East Germany or Hungary.

The vast majority of religious people were antagonistic to the Communists at the outset. The edge of that antagonism has been blunted by now, but most religious people harbor suspicions and distrust of the Communists. These are most commonly expressed privately rather than by means of formal ecclesial declarations. Only veiled expressions can be found occasionally in the Roman Catholic press and in pastoral letters; other churches prefer to abstain from any controversy of this sort.

While no sociologically dependable data exist an objective knowledgeable observer would conclude, as this author does, that the largest number of religious people have chosen the second and third options, namely to live their religious lives with no obvious reference to the social situation or to accommodate themselves pragmatically to the new circumstances. They neither overtly support nor oppose the regime. Most have come to regard Yugoslavia's self-managing, non-aligned brand of socialism as a relative blessing. They remember the war and post-war



times when it was worse and they are glad that they do not share the experience of their other Eastern European neighbors. Some take the long range view, especially some of the Orthodox, saying that the Church has survived many other social and political systems, including those extremely hostile to the Church and they shall outlast this one also. In any case this religious indifference to the implications of the social system is not a peculiarity of the Communist society; many religious people have chosen this option in practically every society, for it is an easy way out. Living in two worlds is easier than reconciling them or fighting the other to the end.

A small minority have taken the third and the fourth option. Some individuals chose both. However, among those willing to engage in dialogue are also some who do not accept socialism by preference but are realistic enough to know that at least in their lifetime the system is unlikely to change and therefore there is a real need for a dialogical interaction which may be of use to both sides. A number of Christians have found the writings of the above mentioned group of humanistic Marxists a welcome advance beyond the dogmatic Marxist position on social processes and on religion. They have decided to respond favorably, though not uncritically. In this group of thinkers, the most interesting are Vjekoslav Bajsić, Tomislav Šagi-Bunic, and Tomo Vereš, all from Zagreb, Archbishop Frane Franić and Drago Simundza from Split, (all Roman Catholic theologians), as well as Jakov Jukić, an anonymous lay sociologist.

The primary interest of these theologians has been to promote the dialogical approach and to explore what dialogue means. That was consistent with the Vatican II interest of the Catholic Church in entering into dialogue with the world, but was not an easy task in a land where traditionally hostility and intolerance were the only methods of dealing with those who differed. Thus a great deal of effort has to be spent in trying to argue with other co-religionists that this is the better approach than the traditional one. Another task which they undertook was to respond in writing to some of the Marxist ideas about religion.

A few minor theological writers have written short essays about the

role of believers in a self-managing society and have praised the system as one of the most suitable for human development. They did not do so out of pressure by the government, but out of conviction that this form of socialism does provide more place for human development and is of potential benefit for religions as well. Some are groping with the issue of what it means to be religious in an industrial, urbanized, secularized socialist society, but none have idolized either the concept or its actuality.

Taking a look at the whole picture one may say that Marxism does not need to fear any orchestrated subversion or outright opposition to it by the religious people or even by its leaders. But since under Yugoslav conditions there is an unusually close link between ethnic nationalism and religion, there is indeed a possibility that the nationalistic and religious forces unite and find themselves in opposition to the unitaristic or centralistic Communist position. Religious people, in other words, may be less loyal to the government than to their own nation and the perception of nationalistic interest (e.g. Macedonian, Serbian, or Croatian).

#### D. Prospects

The relationship between Marxism and religion is strained and complex, with changes having taken place since the immediate post-war period. Shifts toward mutual toleration and de facto coexistence have been made. On both sides a small group of thinkers has creatively reinterpreted some of the traditional stances, primarily based on empirical observations of their partners, and have advocated improved relations and an open dialogue. These thinkers have achieved only limited acceptance and each group has been castigated by its respective leadership which prefers the security of the old positions, albeit suspicious and distrustful ones. The innovations have made an impact but presently it is not clear where the post-Titoist dynamics of development are leading. Currently no new, bold approaches are in sight. But on the other hand, nor is there decisive retrenchment to outright hostilities. The present moment still contains creative possibilities, but these will always work against great odds in the Yugoslav conditions.

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed analysis see Paul Mojzes, "Christian-Marxist Encounter in the Context of a Socialist Society," in Journal of Ecumenical Studies (Philadelphia), Vol. IX, No. 1, (Winter, 1972), pp. 1-27 and Christian-Marxist Dialogue in Eastern Europe (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), primarily pp. 128-158.

<sup>2</sup> This issue is so well documented among experts on Yugoslavia that it does not need additional comment, but for a fine recent treatment see Stella Alexander, "Religion and National Identity in Yugoslavia," Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 1983), pp. 1-19.

<sup>3</sup> Milovan Djilas, Wartime, Transl. by Michael B. Petrovich, (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 201.

<sup>4</sup> Stella Alexander, Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 22-40 and idem.

<sup>5</sup> Mojzes, Christian-Marxist Dialogue in Eastern Europe, pp. 128-129.

<sup>6</sup> Otto Luchterhandt, "Die Religionsfreiheit im Verständnis der sozialistischen Staaten, Glaube in der 2. Welt (Zollikon-Zurich), Vol. 10, No. 9(1982), p. 308. Also Otto Luchterhandt, "The Understanding of Religious Freedom in the Socialist States," OPREE, Vol. 3, No. 3 (April 1983), p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> A good example of this position is Todo Kurtović Crkva i religija u socijalističkom samoupravnom društvu (Belgrade: Izdavačka organizacija "Rad", 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Branko Bošnjak, Filozofija i kršćanstvo (Zagreb: Naprijed, 1966).

<sup>9</sup> Branko Bošnjak i Mijo Škvorc, Marksist i kršćanin (Zagreb: Praxis, 1949).

<sup>10</sup> Esad Ćimić, Drama ateizacije. (Sarajevo: Zavod za izdavanje udzbenika, 1971).

<sup>11</sup> For a more complete treatment see Mojzes, Christian-Marxist Dialogue in Eastern Europe, pp. 128-158, 222-245, et al.

<sup>12</sup> For a slightly different version of the spectrum see P. Mojzes, "Christian-Marxist Dialogue: Opportunity for Renewal of Christian Life," Spirituality Today (Chicago), Vol. 31, No. 4 (December 1979), pp. 312-315.