Cvitković’s "Socijalna nauèavanja u religijama ['Social Doctrines in Religions']" - Book Review

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The phenomenon of religious revivalism among the masses accompanied by a general resurgence of religion in the public sphere is certainly a fact that has marked the last decade of the 20th century, particularly in the former communist and socialist countries of Eastern Europe. This, combined with an uneasy road towards democracy had sparked numerous debates regarding the domains of religion in these new states. One such case is Bosnia and Herzegovina. Not only did this country undergo an overall transition from socialism to democracy, but its efforts were made even harder by the events of war and destruction in which religion/confession and national identity were so mixed that it was sometimes difficult to draw a line between the two (p.67).

In this book the sociologist of religion, Ivan Cvitković, provides for us a very detailed and well written study on some of the most demanding questions that are being faced in the early 21st century, such as the relationship between church and state as well as all the other questions and problems pertaining to it. Cvitković goes very deeply into topics such as the relationship between religious communities and human rights, civil societies, national identity, family, morality, poverty, life, social works, ecology, war and peace, and even religious tourism and pilgrimage. In each chapter he provides a comparative study of the Abrahamic religions and their views on the particular topic, but always adds additional and very useful information about other, mostly far eastern religions such as Buddhism and Shintoism. His careful style of writing does not offend any religion or belief, and his comparative approach is not meant to promote one and discredit another religion, but rather, to show how all religions and beliefs have sometimes a very similar approach to the same questions.

Very often when looking at questions and dilemmas of global importance and related to religion, he reflects upon the situation in his native Bosnia and Herzegovina, and draws parallels with the experiences of Bosnians and Herzegovinians on such questions. It is interesting to note that some of the most important questions and dilemmas that religions faced in different parts of the world were also experienced in Bosnia and Herzegovina, albeit, on a smaller scale.

The first three chapters are of crucial importance to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina as they deal with questions of civil society, human rights, national identity, all of which have gained in importance following the collapse of socialism and the bloody war that followed. Cvitković has a very firm and positive stance regarding the need for further strengthening of democracy and the role of the civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and also clearly defines the position of religion in a secular state. It is often erroneously thought, he points out, that secularism symbolises the collapse or the degradation of religion vis-à-vis the modern state (p.23). Cvitković defines secularism as purely the principle of neutrality of the state regarding religion, and by no means the denial of religion by the state. He insists that religious communities should not have to fear civil society nor the secular state, and that such separation, between church and state, will only protect religious organizations by limiting the influence of politics on them, and of course, vice versa. In a civil society, the idea of the ‘privacy of religion’ (p.15) gains strength. He goes to show that the idea of the ‘privatisation’ (p.17) of religion is an element of modern civil society and that it only deepens the strength of religious freedom enjoyed by individuals by giving each individual the freedom to believe or not to believe, to belong to a religious community or not to belong, to step in and/or step out of a religion at will without having to fear consequences by other members of the religious community or anyone else for that matter.

On the topic of multi-religious life in a multicultural society, Cvitković states what people most often forget, which is that life among the various cultural and religious societies should not merely be ‘living next to each other’ but instead ‘living with each other’ (p.94). The numerous religions and cultures that are shared in a country are a sign of richness and should not be reasons for conflict.

In almost all the question pertaining to religion, Cvitković shows that most of the world’s
religions, especially those of Abrahamic origin often have very similar positions, be they positive
or negative, regarding the same question. And it is quite an irony that many wars in this world
were often fought between the Abrahamic religions that have more in common with each other
than with any other religion. It goes to show that sometimes people of different religions and
beliefs do not adhere to even the basic tenets of their religion and beliefs, and how they even go as
far as to do exactly the contrary as to what was advised or even enjoined upon them by their
religion.

He concludes by saying that tolerance by itself is not enough for a stable society. What
needs to be done is to move on from the already common presumption of the existence of ‘one
truth, one religion’ (p.302), and to move to a broader acceptance of ‘many truths, many religions’
(p.302). Only in this way will people learn to accept ‘others’ as fellow brethren and sisters.

Various Authors: La Slovacchia e la Santa Sede nel XX secolo: Atti del Convegno promosso
dall’Ambasciata della Repubblica Slovacca presso la Santa Sede in occasione del V anniversario della
firma dell’Accordo Base tra la Repubblica Slovacca e la Santa Sede. [Slovakia and the Holy See
Reviewed by Francesco La Rocca, University of Bologna, Italy.

Slovakia is a country which only recently has been able to attain independence: until then
Slovaks have always been, with rare exceptions, subject to several foreign political and cultural
influences. After the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Slovaks lived together with Czechs in
a new state named Czechoslovakia, a state which lasted, with the exception of the creation of the
short-lived Slovak Republic (1939-1945), until 1992. Then, pushed by the events that occurred with
the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, Czechs and Slovaks agreed to divide
Czechoslovakia into two independent states.

The Holy See has been assuredly an important actor in the events of Slovak history. The
pontiffs paid always attention to this Catholic Slavic people, especially in the 20th century. The
Holy See recognized the independence of Slovakia on the 1st of January 1993, and in 2000 a Basic
Treaty regarding the status of the Catholic Church in Slovakia was signed. In order to celebrate the
fifth anniversary of the Treaty, on the 24th of November 2005 the Slovak Embassy to the Holy See
promoted a conference on the history of the relations between the Vatican and the Slovaks during
the past century. At the conference, held at the Augustinianum Patristic Institute in Rome, several
scholars from Slovakia and Italy took part, who reconstructed the history of the relations between
Rome and Bratislava from the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the most recent
agreements between the Church and the Slovak Republic. La Slovacchia e la Santa Sede nel XX secolo
[Slovakia and the Holy See in XX century] is a collection of the papers presented at that occasion.

The papers, some in English and some in Italian, are organized according to the main topics
which have been analysed, during the congress, in four different sessions. The first session was
focused on the relations between Slovakia and the Holy See immediately after World War I. At that
time, the popes had to face not only the old problems related with the Slovak Church, i.e. the low
quality of the local clergy and the tensions between the Slovak Catholics and their Hungarian
bishops, but also the new problems born with the end of the Habsburg Empire and the formation
of the new state of Czechoslovakia. Andreas Gottmann (Historical Institute at the Austrian Cultural
Institute in Rome) and L’uboslav Hromják (Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome) reconstruct the
difficult situation of Slovaks during the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, while the
relations between the Holy See and the new Czechoslovak government, as well as the new points
of tension, are described by Emilia Hrabovec (University of Vienna and University of Trnava). Both
papers refer to important primary sources like the archives of the Apostolic Nunciature in Vienna
and the Vatican Secret Archive.

In the second session authors analysed the turbulent years of World War II, when a first
Slovak state lead by Mons. Jozef Tiso, a Catholic priest who became Prime Minister in 1939 backed