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POLITICAL-SOCIAL ORIGINS OF ATHEISM

by Marko Oršolić

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"Causes of atheism include the critical reaction against religion in some regions, especially against the Christian religion" (The Second Vatican Council).

Encouraged by the words of the Second Vatican Council taken as the motto, I wish to contribute to the philosophical and theological reflections on the causes of contemporary atheism by offering some observations in the field of political science, with special reference to Europe and particularly Yugoslavia. The theological justification for this approach can be found in the well known intervention by Cardinal Šeper and Cardinal König at the Council, on atheism as a distinctively European phenomenon and, of course, in the constitution "Gaudium et spes" of the Second Vatican Council.¹

The readers of this paper may be surprised both by the approach itself and by the unusual way of discussing the political-social origins of unbelief. For this reason I point out that, in contrast to the natural sciences, political science establishes tendencies rather than fully evident laws. Nor is it easy to determine the basic concepts we use here, when wishing to apply them to real people. Indeed, we should bear in mind the borderline between believers and non-believers does not pass between people but rather through people; therefore the division between believers and non-believers is actually an artificial one and is a consequence of a static conception of theism and atheism. To wish to establish this separation would violate the liberty of an individual and melt in the unutterable depth of human distinctiveness. It is for this reason that censuses in Yugoslavia after 1953 do not include the issue of religion.

I am aware of the possibility of purely emotional responses to the matter being presented. Some sensitive believer might say, why do we need all this? Why should we give in to atheism? On the other hand, some non-believer might ask, why should he or she be bothered by this? Criticizing some forms of the politicization of religion and church life he or she politicizes himself or herself and therefore becomes surrounded by the illness he or she is treating others for. To the first group I would say that Jesus Christ, as a God-man, will remain, like in everything else, the unattainable ideal for the believer also in his or her "yielding." As far as atheists are concerned, I think, according to Marx, both atheism, by prevailing over religion, and Marxism (Marx says "communism"), by prevailing over private ownership, is a mediated humanism. Thus the criticism of atheism (either enlightenment or that in the robes of Marxism) is by no means an anti-Marxism nor is the criticism of clericalistic politicization of religion a kind of struggle against religion. It should be kept in mind that vulgar materialism mixed with political voluntarism "gave birth" to Stalinism which is an open wound in the Marxist movement, in the same manner as clericalism is an open wound in the church's tissue.

The Role of Religion and Church in Medieval Society

The two most widespread major modern religions, Islam and Christianity (with its several variations), had a very important public function in the medieval feudal political system in Europe. They permeated their respective political systems to such an extent that one could speak of Muslim or Christian countries respectively, as the prevailing form of political organization till the end of the First World War, which saw the destruction of four empires: Austro-Hungarian, German, Russian, and Turkish, three of which were Christian and one Muslim.

It is worth noting that the three Christian empires included one Catholic (Austro-Hungary), one Protestant (Germany), and one Orthodox (Russia). Each ruling emperor obviously needed his own church and each church seems to have been eager to lean upon its own ruler. The Turkish sultan was also a caliph (i.e., the messenger's deputy). Christian and Muslim countries then helped the establishment of Christian and Muslim civilizations, philosophies, arts, etc. Religion played a very important role in public life. It was the main ideological force of the early Middle Ages and was often abused as ideology. One should remember the Crusades and religious wars of the Christians, holy wars (jihad) led by the Muslims, the inquisition, etc.

The new middle class of the beginning of the 19th century also tended to make religion, Christianity in particular, its political
tool though the middle class here joined conservative, reactionary systems, the best proof of which is the foundation of a world organization, the Holy Alliance, in 1815. The abuse of religion and church institutions in the Middle Ages most frequently occurred: a) as an a priori institution of rule by the will of God, and b) by instrumentalization of the church as the pillar of the society.

I do not wish to claim that, outside of constructed ideologies, religion and church did little for the earthly world by taking part in medieval socio-political systems. However, the fact remains that both religion and church were extremely abused in medieval society, which was very harmful both for society and for religion. Medieval sovereigns ruled by the "Will of God" (Dei gratia), in contrast to the present rulers, who rule by the will of people. It is quite certain that medieval systems were much more distant from the true will of God than the modern ones are from the true will of people. Divinizing monarchs, monarchy, and the existing official government (since all government comes from God) objectively led to the absurd fact that any socio-political change was necessarily directed against the church or even religion if it tended to be progressive and popular. In his book *Politics Based on the Words of Holy Scripture*, French bishop Bossuet gave a theological justification of the godlike character of the monarch's rule. He wrote: "Oh, you kings, have no qualms about exerting your power, since it is of godly origin and serves for the welfare of the whole of mankind." The famous preacher spoke in a similar way: "You are not born great and powerful by chance. God chose you at the beginning of time for earthly glory. He marked you with the sword of his greatness and raised you to the fullness of title and human excellence above the masses of people."³

This godlike character of the king's rule was stressed both in the "Dei gratia" title and in the induction into the service and every other document. French kings were usually crowned in the Rheims Cathedral where the king, surrounded by his whole retinue, first took an oath to the church and her people and then was anointed while the bishop said the following formula: "Be blessed and enthroned as king in this kingdom, that God gave you to rule." On the next day the king would visit the ill and touch everyone saying: "The King touches you and God will cure you."

For this reason it is no wonder that Louis XIV wrote in his "Memories": "The one (God) who gave kings to the people wanted them to be admired as his regents." The divine form of the rule of king and ruler also existed in some regions of Yugoslavia for a long time, in "His apostolic, royal and tzarist Majesty," Franz Joseph of Austria had the right of "veto" in the election of the Pope for a long time.
Conditions were very similar in the Byzantine Empire. After the thorough research done by Ostrogorski one can no longer speak of Caesaropapism within Byzantium, but it is true that the emperor's court had a strong influence on church life. The case was similar in King Nemanja's Serbia.

Until the 1054 schism, the Christian Church was merely regional (Roman, Alexandrian, etc.) but the establishment of national churches such as the Serbian, Bulgarian, Greek, and Russian brought about an instrumentalization of religion aiding the formation of an ideological unity of nations. Catholicism was in Catholic France and in the "Austro-Hungarian" Empire and a similar thing happened to Orthodox Christianity in tsarist Russia. The Constitution of tsarist Russia of 1832 (Article 42) and the Constitution of 1906 (Article 64) say that the tsar, "as a Christian ruler is the supreme protector and guardian of the dogmas of the ruling religion and the defender of the proper faith and all order in the holy Church."

The official textbook for church law by N. Suvorov (Moscow, 1908) claims that "the tsar has potestas iurisdictionis" over the whole church, except in the sacramental sphere (potestas ordinis), which is the responsibility of the clergy under the bishops.

The Protestant form of Christianity, especially in the 19th century and even earlier, became a state church and religion. Let us recall the role of the king in Anglicanism and the state's overall control over public and religious life in the enlightened, absolute monarchy of Friedrich II in Prussia, where "rulers rule us, peasants feed us, soldiers defend us, and clergy pray to God for us. Everybody works and nobody thinks."

Only in this manner can one understand the principle "Cuius regio, illius religio" (He who owns the land owns the religion) imposed by Protestantism to justify the fact that most of the constitutions and statutes of Christian churches were promulgated or approved by the sovereign.

Islam, in the form which was significant for the Yugoslavian geopolitical area, considered the sultan as halifet resulillahi, from the early 14th century until 1924, when the law prescribed that the last caliph was to be expelled from Turkey and his headquarters abolished.

Such a religious function of the sultan, it seems, could not be derived from the Qur'an and Sunna but was based on the consensus of the scholars of the time and on legal analogies. This led to great abuses of religion in the political sphere and was certainly against original Islam. Such a twofold function of the sultan and the theology justifying it did not allow the religious community either to
differ or to be separate from the state, which, indeed, brought about a great abuse of religion for political purposes for centuries.

If we again go back in history, we might claim that in early feudal society the dependence of religion and church upon society, the state, and the sovereign were good for spreading religion. Still, it is certain that this union of state and church, especially in the late Middle Ages led to grave abuses of religion and the church for reactionary political purposes and was thus pernicious for the true happiness of the ruler, people, and true sound piety.

By legitimating the ruler a priori through the will of God, thus making him or her the instrument of God, it was much easier for medieval society to make priests and bishops the tool as well as the pillars of the society. Medieval society, typically a class society, also had the assembly of the estates which included nobility, clergy, and the third estate. When clergy supported the nobility during the French Revolution it was no wonder that the members of the third estate struggled at the same time against God, by whose will the kings were appointed, and the church, which supported the aristocracy. The clergy as well as the nobility enjoyed privileges such as fori, immunitatis, canonica, and the so-called beneficium competentiae, not to speak of the representatives of the hierarchy.

There certainly was antagonism between secular and spiritual rule and the church's and clergy's involvement in the medieval social system often was a necessary precondition for spreading or strengthening religion but--what we often forget--viewed from hindsight at least, it also implied a certain or very frequent abuse of religion for political purposes, turning religion into ideology for preserving or facilitating existing conditions.

Abuse of Religion in Early Bourgeois Society

The bourgeoisie did a great thing by liberating society from medieval narrowness and legal inequality but it enslaved the society by leaving the inequalities of private ownership untouched. In revolutionary Europe of the late eighteenth century, the poet Novalis claims that "only Christianity can save us from revolutionary fire" and Napoleon interpreted the role of religion in early middle-class society as follows: "How can a state without religion be orderly? A society cannot survive without inequality in property and there can be no inequality in property without religion. When one man starves beside another man, who has an abundance of everything, he cannot reconcile himself to this difference without a higher authority telling him: "'God wishes it, God desires it to be so; in this world there should be both rich and poor but the distribution afterwards in eternity will be done in a different way.'"6
The perfidious abuse of religion in middle-class society is the more dangerous the more it is hidden. Think only of Christian theories on private ownership with its theological justification and of Christ's command that he who has two shirts must give one to him who has none.

When the old political regimes were again restored at the Vienna Congress in 1815, though made somewhat more democratic through the introduction of parliamentary monarchies, the former abuse of religion and church in the ancient regime was joined by the new abuse of religion, described by Napoleon Bonaparte.

The system thus established, i.e., the reformed medieval system, had now to be preserved through an organization which was not called the Holy Alliance by chance. The Russian ruler proposed establishing such an organization to preserve the existing regimes and all legal government, since the rulers, Christian in this case, must obey the words of St. Paul that all rule comes from God; so the first article of the document establishing the Holy Alliance quotes St. Paul. Thus Christian rulers (Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic) are also obliged as Christians to preserve any legal government in the world wherever it is in danger. The Holy Alliance experienced various crises but generally it operated more or less successfully until the revolution of 1848 and this is actually the longest period of abuse of religion for reactionary political purposes in Europe. From this period stems the extremely powerful connection between throne and altar which was encountered by Marx and the young working class which was in its process of consolidation.

Having failed to establish a completely Christian society with a significant clerical role and due to the advance of laicism and secularism (education was separated from the Church), certain political forces, especially after World War I, founded Christian parties which, though doing much for their people and the Church at the time, compromised religion with their conservative political conceptions and an inevitable partisanship. Austria is an example of political Catholicism which ended in fascism. We can also find similar abuses in the geopolitical area of Yugoslavia on the eve of and during World War Two. Due to such historical experience as well as the spirit and words of the Second Vatican Council Cardinal König of Vienna said publicly on television on New Year's Eve that in forthcoming Austrian elections no political party had the right to appeal to the Church; and, as is well known, in Austria there are leftist socialist as well as Christian or Catholic political parties.

Position of Religion in Yugoslav Society

This short excursion in the past, though brief and summary,
should not omit an important theme--the position of religion in Yugoslavian society.

The position of religion in Yugoslavian society is based on its experiences during the war against fascism, during the revolution, and also in the program of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, i.e., the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia issued its first program in 1920, the second after the break with Stalin in 1948, and the third in 1958. In the first and second programs there was no word against religion or the Church. There were not even any hints of the issue. But the third program of 1958 states that "membership in the League of Communists is not consistent with any aspect of religiousness."

The programs of Eastern European Communist Parties consider atheism as an indispensable prerequisite for the liberation of the people and the society. On the contrary, Yugoslavian Communists and Marx consider the abolition of private ownership as the prerequisite for human and social emancipation. Therefore, after their break with Stalin and the experience gained in the People's Struggle for Liberation [during World War II] they believed the matter of religion to be the private affair of each citizen and Communist. Yugoslavian Communists were extremely disappointed at the heightened frontal attack on Communism by the Vatican, which started as early as July 1, 1949, by Decree Number 2 of the Holy Office stating that Communism is "materialistic and antichristian." Such an evaluation could not be applied to the Yugoslavian Communist Party, if we examine the words of the Program itself as well as the political practice, according to which many clergy and devout believers of all the religions in Yugoslavia were members of the highest political bodies, in the republican [state] and at the federal level.

The aforesaid Decree of the Holy Office forbids any cooperation with Communists under threat of excommunication from the Church which, in Yugoslav conditions, implied an utter boycott of the legal government recognized by all. This was, of course, interpreted as an act against the state. This clerical anticommunism fed the Stalinist bureaucrats in Yugoslavia. Therefore, as many as 3,712 members were expelled from the League of Communists in one region only, in 1953, mostly because they declared themselves religious in the census. It is like water seeking its own level in two tubes: the more anticommunism there is on one side, the more Stalinist, bureaucratic, conservative, administrative attitude toward faith and believers. The Church responded by elevating the Zagreb archbishop Stepinac to the rank of cardinal on the very Day of the Republic in 1952. Anticommunism was also reinforced by the brutality of Soviet military forces in Poland and Hungary in 1956. This view came to the fore in the old
approach to the relationship between religion and politics in "Punti fermi" [instruction], which says:

1) In all areas of activities, private or public, a Catholic must be led by the laws, orientations, and directions of the hierarchy;

2) The Church has the right and obligation to enter the field of politics in order to enlighten human minds and help them choose what is most appropriate in ethical principles and Christian social science;

3) The problem of political cooperation with those who do not recognize religious principles must be solved not by an individual Catholic but by ecclesiastical authority;

4) There is an insurmountable discrepancy between the Marxist system and the Christian teaching.\textsuperscript{10}

Naturally, when the new program of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia was being issued, people who had read this could not easily allow the existence of two "central committees," one in the Party and the other in the Church hierarchy. So we can very well understand the attitude of the Party program of 1958 about excluding believers from membership in the League of Communists. The reasons for the strict implementation of this attitude towards the Communists and believers should also be sought in the statist-bureaucratic attitude of certain people in the League.

The President of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, himself said, at the Fourth Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in July 1966, that the representatives of conservative bureaucratic forces used "Stalinist methods for ten years."\textsuperscript{11} One can suppose that the conservative bureaucratic forces affected the attitude of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia towards its religious members.

The conditions changed during the 1960s. Yugoslav philosophers and sociologists at a congress in 1959, at the lake of Bled, actually completely rejected ontological materialism, thus rejecting the reflection theory in gnoseology as contrary to truth and to Marx and seeing it as a philosophical precondition to Stalinism.\textsuperscript{12}

Recent papal encyclical letters such as "Mater et magistra," "Pacem in terris," and "Populorum progressio" and the Council itself (1962-65) created a completely new climate of opinion regarding the believers' commitment in the political sphere. At its Tenth Congress in 1964, the Communist Party of Italy reciprocated by issuing a new program without a single word against religion and the Church, but with the claim that religion can, for believers, be a new stimulus in the revolutionary transformation of society.
Since these recent changes within the Catholic Church, the congresses of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia have never discussed the Program itself. However, some prominent Yugoslavian ideologists claimed publicly that "Communists-believers have never been a problem as long as they have been patriotic." And in the second half of 1979 the Presidency of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia publicly attacked sectarianism in all its forms, among them sectarianism toward religious citizens (see the interview with Branko Mikulić, "Borba," end of November 1979).

The attitude of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia towards its religious members will depend both on the members of the League of Communists and also on the believers and their ability to help establish a more just society without any a priori tutelage.

Conclusions

One could say the following in conclusion:

1) Religion and the Church will be politically abused as long as the Church does not realize that the Bible is an inspiration rather than a norm in the political sphere. It is a religious book rather than a political program. Religion can be abused for political purposes both by believers (clergy and hierarchy) and, playing a perfidious game, by various ideologies and political bureaucracies. What we have said, mutatis mutandis, also applies to the Qur'an and the Muslim community.

2) After Galileo's example, the Church realized that it cannot be the guardian of the natural sciences and has renounced it, in general, long ago. Ecclesiastical hegemony, however, tended to survive in the political sphere until the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). No wise person would say that a religious mathematician is not a proper believer if he claimed that two plus two are five rather than four if God so wished. If a religious mathematician, through a complex and arbitrary proof, claimed his result to be dependent on God's will, he would abuse, not revere, God's authority. Believers themselves often make such abuses in the political sphere; clerical hierarchies tolerate them and by their passivity indirectly compromise God's authority. Recent discussions on the attitude of the hierarchy towards national socialism are very instructive in this respect.

3) The Second Vatican Council (in its constitution No. 42 "Gaudium et spes") taking into account such dangers for the church states: "The Church is not, by its mission and nature, tied to any particular form of human culture, politico-economic, or social system."

4) In spite of the abuses of religion, the Church certainly did a lot for the earthly happiness of individuals and society up to the French Revolution. This is recognized by Marxists themselves, e.g.,
Engels. However, since the Vienna Congress in 1815 until the First World War the Church and religion in Europe rather played the role of stabilizing the existing regimes and masking, though not eliminating, suffering which role was intended for the Church and the Christian religion by the bourgeoisie. Such public instrumentalization of religion and the Church into the public political life is an important root of political atheism as a distinctive phenomenon in the Christian West.

5) After the Second Vatican Council the Church returned to its beginnings. It joins no political system. Thus it preserves the dignity of religion and, by de-politicizing the church hierarchy, it objectively politicizes the believer as citizen. By this it helps make society more democratic and at the same time makes the Gospel to be experienced as an inspiration. The similarities between this faith experience and religious life in the early Church are obvious. However, a long time must pass for these processes to be understood and, moreover, accepted. But, a lot has already been done.

6) We have treated in rather one-sided fashion the stance of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, i.e., the League of Communists of Yugoslavia toward religion—that is, its attitude towards the Catholic Church. Such an approach is primarily realistic, but at the same time, also "one-sided."

Endnotes

Report delivered at the Workshop of the Secretariat of the Bishops' Conference of Yugoslavia, on October 20, 1979, and November 12, 1985, in Guadelajara (XII).

1 The intervention of Archbishop Šeper of September 24, 1965, at the Vatican Council which was published in whole in "Volumes" No. 2. Compare T. Šagi-Bunić, Ali drugač puta nema [But There is No Other Way], Zagreb, 1971.


5E. N. Bulbulović, Sveislamski kongres i pitanje hilafeta [All Muslim Congress and the Question of "hilafet"] (Sarajevo, 1926).

6Quoted by M. Pavičević, Francuska revolucija [French Revolution], selection of papers, (Zagreb, 1963).

7Cf. Istorijski arhiv KPJ [Historical Archives of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia], vol. II (Belgrade, 1950) and Peti kongres KPJ [The Fifth Congress of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia] (Papers and Documents) (Belgrade, 1948), and Program SKJ [The Program of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia] (Belgrade, 1958).

8The Decree says that it is forbidden to enter a Communist Party or to favor it, that it is forbidden to publish, read, or contribute to periodicals promulgating the Communist teaching or activities (Canon 1399) and whoever disobeys it, consciously and freely, must not receive the sacraments (except the Sacrament of Matrimony) and those who adhere to the "materialistic and antichristian teaching of Communism" or defend it or spread it fall into a special excommunication which can be solved only by the Holy See. The Decree wanted to set a Chinese wall between Communism and the Catholics.

9Cf. Plenum CK SKBiH [The Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Bosnia and Herzegovina] of July 12 and 13, 1953 ("how to relate to believers") and everything published on this occasion in the Komunist. See also "Osnovne društveno-ekonomske karakteristike mostarskog srëza" [The Basic Socio-Economic Characteristics of Mostar Commune] issued by the end of 1967 and published in a very valuable book SK BiH u borbi za bratstvo i jedinstvo i ravnopravnost naroda i narodnosti [The League of Communists of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Struggle for Brotherhood and Unity and Equality of Nations and Nationalities] (Sarajevo, 1977).


11In the report for the Ninth Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (held in 1969) it is written that until the Fourth
Plenary Session (1966) the decisive influence upon the policy of the League was exerted by conservative bureaucratic forces.

12 M. Petrović, Savremena jugoslovenska filozofija [Contemporary Yugoslav Philosophy] (Subotica, 1979), p. 108.


14 M. Oršolić, "Prilozi diskusiji o odnosu Crkve prema nacional­socjalizmu" [Contribution to the Discussion of the Church's Relation Toward National Socialism], Nova et vetera (Sarajevo, No. 2, 1979). The ideas of the text are to be applied analogously to the entire Yugoslav situation, i.e., to all who helped fascism and to all churches, and, of course to the Islamic community.