The Churches of Former Yugoslavia

Bill Yoder

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree
Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Eastern European Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
THE CHURCHES OF FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

by BILL YODER

Dr. William Yoder (Mennonite) is an academic who lived many years in Eastern Europe and is a keen observer of religious developments in that part of the world. He is a frequent contributor to Religion in Eastern Europe.

Traditionally, the evangelical denominations of Anglo-Saxon descent are among Europe's most mobile religious groupings. Their rapid departure from high-tension zones, such as Bosnia and Serb-held Croatia has left the few who remain without local support. Living in volatile, semi-lawless environments, people of conscience such as these are falling prey to the war profiteer and mafioso.

Sarajevo was without a single Protestant pastor in early 1994. The Pentecostal Dragan Nedić attributes his drafting into the primarily-Muslim Bosnian army to the lack of local support: "Our pastor left twenty months ago. I would not have needed to go to war if we would have had an organization here. I don't want to kill, but we have no advocate here."

Late last year, the Adventist lay preacher Dario Slankamenac spent two months in Sarajevo's military prison for refusing to carry a weapon within the Bosnian army. His unexpected release can be attributed to the favoritism enjoyed by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), the much-respected Adventist relief agency.

The Franciscan Ljubo Lučić of Sarajevo points out that only long-time Jehovah's Witnesses have been exempted from the draft, "The government felt some men only allowed themselves to be baptized in order to escape the draft. A retroactive date was therefore established." Only persons who had been Jehovah's Witnesses prior to the war were granted military exemption.

Nevertheless, persons of faith in former Yugoslavia are usually only persecuted on the basis of their ethnic identities. In a high-tension zone such as Serb-held northeastern Croatia, Croats are categorically excluded from employment. The congregation of eight hundred Slovak-speaking Lutherans in Ilok on the Danube has only a handful of members who are officially employed. "The Serbs view us as Croats," one Slovak Lutheran explained,
"After all, we use the same 'Catholic' calendar". Those older Lutherans who remain in Illok are safeguarding their real estate and hoping for a return to better times.

Indications for both a normalization and a continued abnormality of conditions exist. Only after the Orthodox chapel in Osijek had been restored with donations from the Catholic "Caritas" and the Pentecostal "Agape" relief agencies in February 1993, was the damaged mother church in Osijek-South completely destroyed by explosives.

A young Orthodox bishop, Lukijan, recently compared life in Croatia with a concentration camp, "Only those can understand who have survived a Nazi or Stalinist camp. The Serbian Orthodox live in the Republic of Croatia as if they were in a concentration camp." Nevertheless, the Orthodox Metropolitan of Zagreb, Jovan, returned to his hometown long enough on January 27, 1994, to obtain Croatian citizenship. Since the beginning of the war, Jovan, considered an anti-Croat hardliner, had been active only in Serbia and Slovenia.

Truth and historical clarity are among the earliest victims of war. The contention of France Perko, Catholic Archbishop of Belgrade, that multiple truths exist, is only one indication of that confusion. The Catholic cathedral in Illok was attacked three times with grenades and rockets during the past year. After the church doors were blown away, church leadership replaced them with an impenetrable concrete block. The Methodist Superintendent Martin Chovan of Novi Sad explains, "I have relatives in Illok, and they have assured me this church was used as a weapons arsenal by the Ustashe [Croat extreme nationalist paramilitary troops] during the battle for Vukovar." "That's nonsense," retorted a Baptist neighbor. "All sides use this excuse whenever they damage a church."

Verdicts on the political stance of the Serbian Patriarch Pavle are far from conclusive. During the past Summer, Pavle had traveled to both Banja Luka and Pale in Serb-held Bosnia. Professor Lučić responds: "The Patriarch should never have traveled to Banja Luka! It was outrageous to travel there after every single mosque in the city had been destroyed."

But Živica Tučić, an Orthodox journalist in Belgrade, protests: "In Banja Luka the Patriarch publicly condemned the destruction of the mosques in the most emphatic language possible. Every demolition is worthy of condemnation; world-famous Orthodox cloisters in Herzegovina have also been destroyed. I'm afraid the churches can do very little to halt this kind of activity."

The Christians of Serbia groan under the burden of international sanctions. Andrej Beredi, Bishop of the Slovak-speaking Lutheran church in Vojvodina/Serbia, retrieved the church books to prove that he had officiated at thirty-four funerals last year, up from the previous average of eighteen per year. "These are the victims of extensive Western sanctions," the Bishop exclaimed. "The West is responsible for these deaths, not [Prime Minister] Milošević. Jesus would not have acted like this."
Senior Vlado Deutsch, head of the Lutheran Church in Croatia and Bosnia, sees the matter differently. In Zagreb he stated: "Because Bishop Beredi is afraid, he has tried repeatedly to get resolutions against Western sanctions passed. He hasn't succeeded."

The issue of sanctions is one source of inner-Protestant tensions between Croatia and Serbia. Serbs regards themselves to be blamed unfairly. Besides pointing to their own non-involvement, they tend to divide the guilt evenly among all parties to the conflict. Serbs view Western demands for military intervention as blind subservience to the political intentions of the Croatian state.

Croats, however, consistently demand undiluted condemnation of the so called Serbian aggressor. Significantly, the outbreak of Muslim-Croat hostilities has not sufficed to bring about any public statement by Protestants criticizing their own Croatian government's role in that conflict.

The evangelicals of ex-Yugoslavia tend to make intellectually indefensible distinctions between faith and politics. Slobodan Andjelic of Belgrade's Pentecostal "Temple of the Holy Trinity" assures, "We will never go out on the street and protest. Such an approach would be political." But Serbian evangelicals do oppose international sanctions while applauding the confessionally neutral state espoused by Milošević's socialist government. His government's transition from atheism to religious pluralism, not from atheism to Orthodoxy, has won him respect among evangelicals. Dozens of Western missionaries in Serbia have gained legal status; they no longer need to pose as students.

Protestantism's new visibility in former Yugoslavia, a result of the work of relief agencies and the relative success of evangelistic efforts, has caused rawer Orthodox-Protestant relations. The link between relief aid and evangelism leads to the accusation that evangelicals are "purchasing converts." Bishop Beredi of Novi Sad claims that "Pentecostals are using aid packages as bait to buy souls." Evangelistic campaigns in his city last Summer resulted in anti-evangelical brochures and scuffles with Orthodox seminary students. Beredi admits that even his own church's relations with the Orthodox are deteriorating.

The Muslims are also detaching themselves from their former compatriots. In Sarajevo, the radicalization of the Muslim majority is readily apparent; crammed Koran schools and scarved women have become commonplace. "This is the hottest, latest fashion," the Adventist Nikolina Mustapic conceded with a scowl. "We must appear differently from our enemies," the Muslim Sadie Sukic assured.

The dream of Milorad Pupovac, of the Zagreb-based Serbian Democratic Forum, that conditions will allow Serbs and Croats total freedom in choosing a confession of their choice, will undoubtedly remain utopian. The chances for uncoupling confession from nationality remain slim. Živica Tučić points out that Serb conversions to Catholicism have always served as "the starting point for all surreptitious movements towards Croatization."