Letter to the Editor (Response to the Article "The Role of Religion in the War in the Former Yugoslavia")

Geert van Dartel
Dear Editor,

Yesterday I received your very interesting article on the role of the religious communities in the war in former Yugoslavia in the June issue of Religion in Eastern Europe. I noticed of course that you disagree with the thesis that I put forward in my lecture from November 1991 (published 1992 in Religion, State and Society). Well that is a pity. What I tried to do was to deliver an analysis of the development of theological thinking in both churches, and it is that analysis that led to the distinction I made. By the way I do not think that your remark on the late Dr. Josip Turčinović is correct. It reminded me of the old trick of the authorities to bring about a split between the progressive and liberal theologians on the one hand and the conservative and nationalist theologians and bishops on the other hand. Dr. Josip Turčinović never allowed them to succeed in that effort. He was a very important teacher of the Church with others such as prof. Dr. Tomislav Šagi-Bunić and Vjekoslav Bajsic. If you study the recent documents of the Catholic Church in Croatia, you will notice, notwithstanding all the struggle there has been that their work has born fruit. Of course there is no safeguard for all times. New theologians are very much needed to take the plough over from their hands because the times are very dangerous now.

You have a different approach towards the complexity of the Yugoslav drama as far as I can see. Your criticism of all institutional religions in former Yugoslavia is a very harsh one because in your opinion the institutional religions bear all a heavy responsibility for getting their people a ticket to hell. It is quite an accusation. It is far more harsh than my attempt to analyze the theological concept of bishop Nikolaj Velimirović which you say has an anti-Serbian Orthodox bias. I wrote this article in 1986/87 at a time when polemics about religious and national integrity grew, and the memory of bishop Nikolaj was openly revitalized in Serbia. The article was meant to be published in a book about Serbian Orthodoxy but that book never appeared nor did my article. It was with a lot of concern that I wrote that article then and not at all with the intention to attack the Serbian Orthodox
Church. The article is written almost exclusively on the basis of Serbian sources (in the publication in Glaube in der 2. Welt [hereafter G2W] in 1993 one did not take the notes because of lack of space). What was at stake in 1986/87 was the revitalization of a concept of thinking that would deteriorate totally the ecumenical dialogue and not only that. At that time I wrote it because I felt I had to do so. Such a process did not occur within Roman Catholic theology, and I hope it will not happen in the future although of course I am also worried when I see a quote like the one from Veritas in your article (I do not know the author). I do not think however that this position is typical for the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia.

The manuscript by Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović was, so the translator told me some years ago, read by Serbian theologians, who—as he told me—found it interesting. I also asked the reaction on this article from my professor Turcinovic. He did not make a lengthy comment on it. He only said: "It is a good article, but they will not publish it." "Where will it be published," I asked. "Abroad," he said. It was, indeed, several years before it was published thanks to G2W. And of course the impact is now different because there is this diabolical war going on. What was meant as an appeal to come to senses and to dialogue, perhaps as a well-meant warning for certain tendencies in the older Serbian theology, sounds perhaps now as a severe criticism. Certainly such theological thinking is not uniquely Serbian Orthodox, as you say, but that is the point; the point is how it was revitalised in the eighties which was unique.

In your article you distinguish between the contribution of religious communities toward hatred and war and the contribution of religious communities toward reconciliation. The second paragraph, where the ecumenical momentum is highlighted, is very short. For a complete and accurate understanding of ecumenical involvement in the former Yugoslavia it would be interesting to know how come that the international ecumenical bodies and agencies (such as the World Council of Churches and the Council of European Churches) seriously started to give attention to the huge problems and barriers that underlay inter-religious understanding and reconciliation only after the outburst of war in 1991. My intuition tells me that with your approach it would be possible to analyze critically the parallels between the involvement of the international political community (European Community and United Nations) as well as the international ecumenical community. One is one judged in the end not only on the basis of having issued nice statements. And that is the reason why I really do believe that the position of the religious communities, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, or Islamic in the Balkans is, although jeopardized, not worse than elsewhere. I therefore do not understand your accusation at the end of the article which is in my opinion fundamentally false.
Regarding your criticism of the writing of Dr. Anne Herbst of G2W I do not have to react. She can and I hope will speak for herself. But one thing I do want to say: it is very unfair to accuse her for demonizing the Serbian Orthodox Church because she is very active in trying to keep the contacts with the Serbian Orthodox Church open in order to come to a true dialogue. She feels the pain and traumas that are present within the religious communities in the Balkans and is trying to heal them as far as she is able to do so.

Finally about myself. I am not a Catholic priest as you assumed but a so-called lay-theologian, Roman Catholic indeed.

With kind regards,
Geert van Dartel

Zagreb, 23 July 1993

Dear Editor:

In Religion in Eastern Europe Vol. XIII, No. 3, pp. 13-32 Paul Mojzes, the journal's editor, published "The Role of the Religious Communities in the War in Former Yugoslavia." Since the author strongly disagrees with my views expressed in unfinished manuscripts I have given him, I feel obliged to reply to his article.

Even though I consider Dr. Mojzes a friend, I must immediately express my surprise that the editorial board approved an article which is full of uncritical statements, innuendos, and unsupported assertions and which is as uninformed as it is tendentious. Substantial flaws are evident in the very first paragraph. He begins with two premises. The first is the self-evident platitude "that war is the worst form of human interaction." The second is that "cooperation among people," is "more important than national sovereignty" and similar values. He somehow connects these two premises with his main thesis, saying that religious communities in the states of former Yugoslavia were more interested in "national sovereignty" that in "cooperation among people," which makes them responsible for war. He not only wants to prove that religious communities have made major contributions to the war in former Yugoslavia but also distributes that responsibility equally among religious communities in order to diminish the international outrage at the behavior of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Mojzes disregards the obvious fact that "national sovereignty, traditions, customs, and historical boundaries" regularly do not interfere with "cooperation among people." If that is the case with most states in the world, why would it not be the case with the states which emerged out of the dissolution of former Yugoslavia? For some reason Mojzes denies the churches of former Yugoslavia the right to support self-determination of nations to which