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Vjekoslav Perica
University of Rijeka, Croatia

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WINDS OF CHANGE 1989

A PERSPECTIVE FROM AN OFFICE FOR RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS SOMEWHERE IN EASTERN EUROPE

By Vjekoslav Perica

Vjekoslav Perica is a Croatian-American historian, author of, among others, *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and *Pax Americana in the Adriatic and the Balkans: History, Memory and Cultural Representations of U.S. Peacemaking, 1919-2014* (in Croatian), (Zagreb: Algoritam, 2015). He currently works on a book and humanitarian-peacemaking project tentatively titled, “Balkanization and Reconciliation.” Perica holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, USA. In the 1970s in former Yugoslavia, he was a basketball player; in the 1980s he was a jurist and journalist until coming to America in 1991. As a US academic, he has been a Fulbright scholar in Belgrade, Serbia, and in 2012 he held a research fellowship at Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS). Since 2006, Perica has been a Professor of History at the University of Rijeka, Croatia from which he is retiring this year. Perica lives in Baltimore, Maryland and on the Dalmatian isle of Šolta, Croatia. In between, most enthusiastically, he spends time with grandsons and their pets in New York City.

Under communism, in what used to be Eastern Europe, religion was neither outlawed nor favorably regarded either. In some cases, church and state had been at latent or open war as in Poland or in the former Yugoslavia. There, church-state relations radically changed over the course of more than five decades, which is the theme of this article. Confrontations began in 1945 and spanned to 1953. Accommodations from 1966 to 1980 permitted a relatively peaceful coexistence between church and state. Thereafter the public religions and ethnic mobilizations of the 1980s escalated into the Balkan wars of the 1990s. It was during this era when the major faiths merged with the ethnic warring factions. As the Cold War ended, and communist regimes collapsed across East Central Europe, Yugoslav post-Titoist elites in the two westernmost Yugoslav republics presented reform-minded positions and images. Revising restrictive policies toward religion seemed appropriate for a start. Slovenia, soon followed by Croatia, symbolically promoted Christmas greetings and programs on state TV. In Croatia, regional and local offices for religious

affairs were urged from higher state and party authorities to make religious organizations the ailing regime's friends.

Religious communities generally welcomed the new policies, yet their responses varied depending on whether they were majority or minority groups. Religious minorities would show support for the reforms to abolish official atheism, expand religious liberty, and democratize the country whose unity they did not question. By contrast, the majority religions, notably Serbian Orthodoxy and Croat Catholicism--and after 1989, also Bosnian Islam--preferred balkanization of the multiethnic federation to be replaced by homogenous ethno-confessional nation-states with religious monopolies.

These notes outline some aspects of the landmark change according to the records from the City Council's Office for Religious Affairs in Split, Dalmatia, Croatia's largest coastal city. The picture is polished by reminiscences of the office's administrator, who happens to be a firsthand witness and survivor of the Great Transformation--namely this article's author.

In 1989, the tiny local church community of the Seventh-day Adventists appointed a new pastor. He visited the city office for religious affairs to introduce himself and inquire about renovation of their house for worship. The meeting was held in a spacious mayor's office over sandwiches and refreshments, which was not customary prior to the relaxation. The new location and logistics were to showcase the similarly new liberal policy, outlined in the fresh set of instructions from above. The communists must free themselves from "sectarian mentality," a Croatian Communist party document pointed out in order to argue that the party now needs to embrace everyone, including religious believers willing to support the key values of the multiethnic federalism, socialist self-managed economy, and nonaligned foreign policy.

The state and the party granted a generous funding for the logistical support to meetings with religious authorities. Hence, the mayor made available her salon, notably adorned with portrait of the city's leaders from Emperor Diocletian to the last communist, and staff portraits for the purpose of banquets and receptions. However, the treatment of the major churches and religious minorities differed considerably. Thus, if the visitors to the office for religious affairs were the Catholic Archbishop metropolitan or Serbian Orthodox bishop, the mayor would make sure to greet religious leaders personally as waiters in formal attire serve Dalmatian *scampi risotto*, Italian *prosciutto*, and fine wines. For an Adventist pastor, however, the sandwiches would do.

Nonetheless, the chairman and the administrator greeted the young pastor with cordial smiles and kind words. Moreover, the sandwiches were made vegetarian and beverages non-alcoholic to show respect for this religion's nutritional habits. The young cleric was originally from the Vojvodina, Yugoslavia's remarkable ethnically and religiously diverse province, although the wars of the 1990s remarkably enhanced the Serb relative majority, while local societies still remained pluralistic. In the Vojvodina autonomous province, besides the two major Christian Churches encompassing the two largest nationalities, the Serbs and the Croats, there were also some 40 plus smaller, mainly Christian, groups, with the membership of several dozen ethnic minorities. The pastor spoke in the Serbo-Croatian *ekavian* urban dialect of Novi Sad and Belgrade where he went to school and served before. An active and outgoing personality, he revealed that his congregation held weekly worship services in a private apartment on the 10th floor of a suburban socialist-era skyscraper. The flock did not proselytize in the neighborhood, however, former pastors explained. Instead, he initiated cordial greetings in the halls and elevators, in the streets and plazas, and small everyday talks aimed at showing that the church members were friendly neighbors prepared to help everyone. The Church owned a house of worship at a prestigious city center location next to large park. Yet, the building, damaged during the construction of the city's underground railway, was not functional and needed a thorough reconstruction. City authorities covered the damage, and the Church secured additional funding from its own resources. The construction could begin, but stalled for many years. The problem was not the regime's ideological bias but bureaucratic hairsplitting, combined with difficulties caused by the failing socialist urban development. It was not about ideological obstruction in late socialism, as the antireligious aspect of the ideology had lost most of its revolutionary zeal.

The pastor took a bite of a vegetarian sandwich listening to the chairman of the Committee for religious affairs elaborating the new policy: "Dear Sir, our party is changing course," comrade chairman explained: "From now on, you get not just vegetarian sandwiches but also free legal assistance and most importantly, license for rebuilding the church! I mean--promptly, say, how about next week; you just stop by and pick up all the documents...." The Seventh-day Adventist was stunned. He looked in disbelief, paused with his vegetarian sandwich and almost spilled a glass of lemonade on a Persian rug made in Bosnia.

The local congregation of Seventh-Day Adventists would soon begin the renovation and enlargement of their house of worship. The project paused during the war in Croatia and Bosnia-

Herzegovina 1991-1995. The new, enlarged and modernized church finally opened in 1998. The local newspaper, controlled by the ruling nationalistic Croat-Catholic party, acknowledged the Adventists' humanitarian work with refugees during the war. Moreover, the paper bragged that the new democratic government, celebrating religious liberty previously suppressed by godless communists, had issued nearly a hundred licenses for new church construction in the city metropolitan area. This was not quite true. The city archives and records show that from 1988 to 1991 alone, the office for religious affairs issued 75 licenses for new churches and a mosque. What actually changed when the nationalists took power in 1990, was that the new administration allowed Catholic parishes and monasteries to increase ambitions and skip rules and boundaries. This resulted in several dozen landmarks of the new era: ugly, triumphalist, and boastful sacral architecture. The new construction devastated parks and recreation areas, penetrated pedestrian zones on ancient plazas, and in suburbia it competed with corporate warehouses and shopping malls as conspicuous landmarks of the new landscape.

In the landmark year of 1989, the office for religious affairs in the city of Split also recorded a historic meeting with Jehovah Witnesses. Historic it was, regarding the fact that nobody ever invited them for a visit and talk before, let alone the sandwiches and refreshments. Most importantly, friendly meetings were followed by quick authorization of new church construction. Three Jehovah's Witnesses leaders dressed in dark blue and grey suits visited the office for religious affairs. Their visit succeeded the office's invitation for a meeting, promising to address the group's long-standing request for their Hall for meetings and worship. The office would have previously never invited them except for issuing of warnings and reprimands about conscientious objectors' conflict with the Yugoslav Army and for knocking on concerned citizens' doors. Two of the three church leaders were from the local congregation and the third arrived from the capital Belgrade. It was made known to us by the office by the local state security police department, that they all did time in prison between 5-15 years for refusing to carry weapons during military service.

Jehovah's Witnesses politely declined the sandwiches accepting only water and lemonade. The talk about the request for a larger Meeting Hall was brief. Then the office's administrator guided the guests to the adjacent Department for Urban Planning where a building license awaited them along with friendly experts and counselors who could help with the details. Jehovah's Witnesses, although used to witnessing unexpected scenarios when knocking uninvited on

people's doors to deliver *The Watchtower* journal, this time looked surprised and confused, if not shocked.

A week later, two of the three Jehovah Witnesses who previously visited the Office for Religious Affairs knocked on the committee administrator's doors without appointment. They brought a gift, a nicely gift-wrapped bottle of scotch whiskey. The brand was rather cheap, however; probably because of Jehovah's Witnesses' ignorance about good whiskeys rather than frugality. Back then, under mature Titoism, Yugoslav socialist middle class preferred a rather expensive imported Chivas 12 years old scotch whiskey, famously enjoyed by Tito himself. Yet, practicing religious believers in communist Yugoslavia were unlikely to express interest in the atheistic dictator's drinking habits. Jehovah Witnesses, holding the gift, sat solemnly, telling their previous bitter experiences with this office, speaking on the verge of tears. They wished to express gratitude, they said, for the kindness and understanding unseen before by the members of their community in interaction with this government. The administrator politely declined to accept the gift. He advised, with tongue-in check, that it could better serve purpose later in the process to make happier and more efficient the late socialist-era construction inspectors.

Paradoxically, Yugoslav communist authorities harassed the non-threatening religious opposition while appeasing the regime's avowed clerical-nationalist enemies. Religious minorities were mistreated solely because of their religiosity. Their congregations were multiethnic and apolitical. Their members were often from mixed marriages and multiethnic families naturally supportive of Yugoslav unity and federalism, but abhorrent to the major ethnic nationalisms such as Great Serbian and Croat separatist. Serbian and Croatian churches, and by the late 1980s, also the third largest religion, the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, had all fused religious and national identity while seeking the balkanization of Yugoslavia. By contrast, religious minorities, although opposing communist party monopoly and official atheism, preferred a united multiethnic Yugoslavia.

The Titoist regime repression of Jehovah Witnesses and the Nazarenes as conscientious objectors exemplifies methods that not even the worst clerical nationalists had suffered. Conscientious objectors challenged the Yugoslav Peoples' Army—the most rigid segment of the regime. This persecution against religious minorities did not ease during the liberalized socialism of the seventies and eighties. At the same time, the Serbian Orthodox Church and Croatian national Catholicism became locomotives of ethnic nationalist movements. After Tito's death, it became

clear that the ethno-confessional blocks sought to dismantle the Yugoslav federation and replace it with ethnic nation-states. The project would involve the partitioning of Bosnia-Herzegovina and therefore, a major war. The regime, however, harassed religious minorities and only sporadically applied repression against the major churches while negotiating and seeking some kind of a deal with the two clerical elites.

Unlike the grateful representatives of the Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses responding to the policy changes of 1989, the majority clerical elites smelled power; and that in 1989 became quite visible. They turned arrogant and demanding. While visiting this office for religious affairs in the late 1980s, the Croat Catholic Archbishop and the Serb Bishop posed not just as negotiators with leverage but also as superior political rivals. This duo openly showed scorn for government officials, looking down on them and asking to negotiate with the top state and federal authorities. The Catholic Archbishop, for example, criticized the government for not responding appropriately to a then-galloping Serbian nationalism. yet stopped short of promising the Church's support for at least moderate nationalists in the first multiparty elections although a coalition of the left and nationalist moderates, if victorious, could have averted the war. Speaking of which, both major churches had considered the partition and war options as early as 1987; the Serbian Orthodox Church expressed it openly. Historians would find noteworthy the following episode: a meeting in the office for religious affairs with the Serbian Orthodox Bishop, regarding preparations for the 600th anniversary of the Kosovo Battle in June 1989. This Bishop first ignored the license to rebuild the local parish church presented to him by the city authorities, aimed at countering the media campaign from Belgrade. The Bishop's refusal to comply with Croatia's authorities, motivated solely by ethnic and religious hatred, was based on long-standing negligence to provide the Serb Orthodox community in Split a place of worship. As the meeting neared conclusion, the Serb bishop mentioned the following: "Let me tell, you, gentlemen, that our Church has very good relations with the Yugoslav People's Army. For celebrating the Kosovo battle jubilee's in Dalmatia, we have asked military authorities at Knin to lend us their large tents for the faithful to gather in the shade around the church after the liturgy. They gladly granted our request. You should know, gentlemen, our Church and our army are on very good terms, we are very close friends. In case of a serious crisis I am sure that we would be on the same side," the bishop remarked with a cynical grin.

At the time, the government officials were left surprised while contemplating the meaning of the new discourse. Two years later, the Serbian minority in Croatia staged an armed rebellion headquartered at the city of Knin. Subsequently, an all-out war in Croatia broke out with the major battle over the city of Vukovar, on the border between Serbia and Croatia. The city was defended by Croat separatist militia and besieged by the Yugoslav Army and Serb nationalist paramilitaries. As Croat fighters wore crosses and were assisted by military chaplains, some Serbian church leaders sprinkled holy water on the tanks rolling to the battle.

After the collapse of Yugoslavia and Balkan wars of the 1990s, new nation-states came to life across the balkanized region. The criminal practices of ethnic cleansing made them ethnically homogenous more than ever before in history. The new Serbia and Croatia were designed according to the new model of Balkan nationalism as mutually hostile, ethnocentric states, each with a religious monopoly or “national church.” Religious and ethnic minorities continued to be stigmatized groups and second-class citizens sharing the sorry fate with atheists who once persecuted them. Ironically, many of the atheists had learned how to stay in power by adopting the new state-sponsored religiosity.