The Protestant Witness in War Zones of Former Yugoslavia

Bill Yoder
THE PROTESTANT WITNESS IN WAR ZONES OF FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

by Bill Yoder

Dr. Bill Yoder (Mennonite) is a member of the Board of Advisory Editors of REE and a regular contributor to this periodical. The article was written during his recent visit to former Yugoslavia. The first of the two interviews was with Dr. Milorad Pupovac, director of the Zagreb-based Serbian Democratic Forum, a human rights lobby dedicated to defending the interests of Serbs living in Croatia in Zagreb on February 16, 1994. The second was with Dr. Franjo Perko, Archbishop of the Roman Catholic diocese of Belgrade, who is also the Metropolitan (or head) of all Catholics residing within Serbia in Belgrade on February 21, 1994.

Sarajevans wanting to worship in a Protestant service can do so only on Saturdays. Except for the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Seventh-Day Adventists are the sole Protestants still holding church services in the war-torn city. Though the Adventist population has shriveled from 100 to 20 baptized members, its Saturday services are attracting 200 persons. Not a single Protestant pastor remains. The Baptist Jasmina Karamehmedović laments: “What a shame that we do not have any pastors here! People who had never asked about God before are now crying out to him.”

Young lay members have shouldered the burden at Adventist headquarters. In Belgrade, Sarajevo’s Adventist pastor, Radomir Nikolić, informed Christianity Today that he was aware of his workers’ continued well-being: He had recently heard a meditation by Nikolina Mustapić on Sarajevo radio. During heavy shelling months ago, the wiry Mustapić had admonished worshipers to drown out the explosions by singing louder. Fortunately, Nikolić’s return to Sarajevo appears imminent. When told that family considerations caused all pastors to depart, one Adventist retorted: “They all say that.”

Only a handful of Pentecostals remain in the city; two of its brightest young men fell in combat during the past year. According to Dragan Nedić, a Serbian Pentecostal, who is also serving in the primarily-Muslim Bosnian army: “Our pastor left twenty months ago. Why has he never tried to contact us? No organization has attempted to contact us, it’s as if we were invisible. Why isn’t Billy Graham trying to come here? I can’t tell you how disappointed we are. 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. Only God knows how much we could have achieved had we stayed together."

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. The strong reputation of the Adventist relief agency, ADRA, undoubtedly led to his abrupt release. One Jehovah's Witness remains imprisoned in Sarajevo for refusing all forms of noncombatant service.

Few Sarajevan families remain intact. The Lutheran Samir Sofo's wife, Alma, and their small son traveled ninety miles north to visit her parents in Tesanj on April 4, 1992. The Serbian army blockaded Sarajevo that night. Imprisoned within separate Muslim-held enclaves, they haven't seen each other since.

The Protestant presence in Bosnia has always been minuscule. Flight from the present war has made them virtually extinct. With funding from the Southern Baptists, Ilija Škorić of Belgrade visits families in Serb-held Bosnia. Using contacts gained through the Hleb Života [Bread of Life] relief agency, he tracks refugees who have returned home to Bosnia from Serbia. House churches are forming at Ključ and Laktaši in the vicinity of Banja Luka. "People are very open for the Gospel," Škorić explained. "They are very pleased when we offer them Bibles. Before the war, it was different." On a trip to Bosnia in January, Škorić distributed 1,000 Bibles, many of them at military checkpoints. Škorić adds that he hopes to move into an empty house in Laktaši soon: "The Church in Belgrade says it's too dangerous now to stay there with my family."

In Croatian-held West Mostar, Nikola Škrinjaric is pastoring a new, thriving Pentecostal congregation meeting in a warehouse. Attendance presently peaks at 130. Though dozens of members have left, a steady stream of converts has kept the rolls bulging. Škrinjaric assures, "If one has the opportunity to leave, one should, because her or his own future and that of their children is in jeopardy. We believe God will bring new people to Himself to replace those who have left." Škrinjaric and his wife have chosen to remain living on the battlefield "because we know we would have no peace living elsewhere. We believe God has called us to be here."

In the destroyed city of Vukovar, Ružnica Šimunić and her sister, Hermina, have heard a similar call. They hitchhike to neighboring villages to serve house groups which they have founded. As Croats, their lives were highly endangered during and after the siege of Vukovar in 1991. "The situation is much better now," Ružnica Šimunić contends. "We had received a prophecy that we would not be harmed, and that God will in time be granting a great revival here. Relatives want us to join them in Australia, but God has called us to serve him here."
But life near the front lines in this Serb-controlled corner of Croatia is far from normal. In Dalj, troops from the private army of the Serb radical Arkan secure the safety and screen the guests of the Orthodox Archbishop Lukijan. During the last year, the historic Catholic cathedral at Ilok on the Danube was attacked on three occasions. After the church doors were blown away, the priest, Father Marko, replaced them with a massive, impenetrable concrete block. The block is already pockmarked by bullets. According to Marko, "Believers are still being harassed by children who throw stones at them on their way to Mass." The Methodist Superintendent, Martin Hovan of Novi Sad, contends this church had been used as a weapons arsenal by Croatian extremists during the Vukovar war.

Visits by evangelical leaders to these war zones are extremely rare. Evangelicals from Vukovar and Plaski in Serb-held Croatia are usually forced to travel to Serbia proper to receive relief and pastoral aid.

Virtually every relief agency in these war zones is faced with a common dilemma: Thanks to military roadblocks, they either help feed soldiers, or they feed no one. In addition, Ivan Vacek of the Zagreb-based Duhovna Stvarnost relief agency explains, "When every adult male in a given village is mobilized, the distinctions between military and civilian become clouded." Though Adventists and Baptists assure that food packages are never distributed in connection with church services, evangelicals are frequently accused of "buying converts." Andrej Beredi, Bishop of northern Serbia's 51,000 Lutherans, claims that Pentecostals are "using relief packages as bait to attract people. They are buying souls."

John Keith of Canadian Baptist International Ministries recognizes little bias in aid distribution and counters that Baptist relief has "been heavily weighted towards Bosnia, the displaced, and the refugees." Since there are virtually no Baptists in Bosnia, how could the Baptists be accused of preferential treatment?

Yet distribution is rarely completely disinterested. Understandably, a Sarajevo evangelical forwards surplus food packages to the neighbors of her damaged apartment to keep it from being pillaged.

Evangelicals in Serbia and Croatia are surprisingly close on international sanctions. Aleksander Birvis of Belgrade, a Baptist pastor and Serbian patriot, concedes the legitimacy of sanctions on Serbia's heavy industry. "Sanctions are well-intentioned," he concludes, "but they must hit those who are responsible for the war. It's ludicrous that sanctions keep Slovenes in Belgrade from obtaining Bibles in their own language."

Peter Kuzmič, President of Croatia's "Evangelical Theological Faculty" agrees: "My problem is with those [Orthodox clergy] who want sanctions on military aid lifted."

Nevertheless, Serbian evangelicals still interpret calls for sanctions as a spiritual affront. According to Slobodan Andjelić of Belgrade's Pentecostal "Temple of the Holy Trinity,"
refusing to send humanitarian aid to Serbia is akin to "blocking Croats from attending a church service."

While Serbian evangelicals tend to divide the war guilt equally between all factions, Croatian evangelicals demand a round condemnation of Serbia's military policies. Andjelić retorts: "We will never go out on the street and protest. Such an approach would be political and divisive." In Serbia, evangelical calls for Western intervention are regarded as unqualified conformity to the Croatian political cause.

Serbian evangelicals approve of the confessionally neutral state espoused by Milošević's socialist government: They see in him a major impediment to the creation of a clerical Orthodox state. Most Orthodox approve of Milošević's ethnic policies while decrying his secularist church stance; evangelicals display the opposite preferences.

SERB HUMAN RIGHTS IN CROATIA

1. Yoder: How many Serbs lived in Croatia prior to the present war, and how many are now living in the Croat-controlled parts of Croatia?

Milorad Pupovac: Before the war, around 600,000 Serbs lived in Croatia including those in the Krajina area [the region now controlled by Serb forces]. Approximately 450,000 of these lived outside of Krajina. Now, only 100–150,000 remain in these Croat-controlled territories.

2. What are the primary human rights issues in Croatia today?

Preserving the right to live in a flat, retaining places of work, obtaining citizenship, preserving one's confessional or ethnic identity, and political representation. Formally, we are represented by thirteen Serbs in the Croatian parliament, but they were all appointed by predominately Croatian parties.

This party, the Serbian National Party, has been subservient to the ruling authority from the beginning of the conflict and was promoted during the conflict as the official voice of the Serbs in Croatia. This party therefore has little in common with the principles of representative democracy.

3. Are you creating a new party?
We are preparing to create a new party. This won't be easy because we need to consult everyone who can influence our activity, especially the Serbs in Krajina. Without their cooperation, there can be no global Serbo-Croatian reconciliation.

4. The Croatian language is being modified. Do you as a Serb accept these changes for yourself?

No, because they are not part of my linguistic or cultural identity. These changes are remote from me and our past common life here in Croatia. But this new language has become a reality. I hope that smart and clever people will realize that linguistic radicalism is dangerous for the Croatian people, especially if they hope to communicate with their Serbian neighbors.

5. Do you still speak "Serbo-Croatian"?

I don't know which name to use—we are speaking the same language as before. We are ready to respect the will of our Croatian fellows and are willing to be patient as they try and find a linguistic identity. But in turn, we would like them to respect our linguistic attitudes.

6. Metropolitan Jovan, the head of all Croatian Orthodox, has protested against the forced baptism of children as Catholics. A retired Orthodox priest, Jovan Nikolić, says these children stem from mixed marriages and, as the children of atheistic parents, had never been baptized. Are forced baptisms or conversions occurring?

"Forced baptism" is too strong of a term. What has occurred is the result of a general situation which stigmatizes Serbs and the Orthodox as well as the lack of a clear confessional identity among many Serbs and Croats. We had asked the authorities to intervene and assure Serbs that it is not necessary to change one's national or confessional identity. Yet no one from the church or state authorities responded.

The Orthodox church authority did not do everything possible to prevent such processes, so it is co-responsible. It did not call people to stay here and wait for the day when everyone will recognize that we must live together as Orthodox and Catholics. Unfortunately, many people thereupon changed their confessional identities. But no one can say it was forced by a specific priest or church authority. We simply ask the authorities: Why do you tolerate such social transitions? Why do you accept the results of war propaganda?

7. Is a child of Serb parents baptized as a Catholic still a Serb?
Of course. The problem is only that we need to create the climate which allows people a real choice. We don’t approve of drastic conditions forcing involuntary decisions upon people. We should all be free to choose differing national, confessional, and linguistic identities. No one should determine that I must be born as a Serb, an Orthodox or a Catholic. That should be the result of my respect for a tradition, the result of a conscious decision. No one should be able to say: "All Serbs must be Orthodox," or, "All Croats must be Catholics." Why not Protestant or Jewish, or whatever?

8. Do you have any numbers pertaining to the numeric losses for the Orthodox church in Croatia?

That is difficult and dangerous to say. Some changes have a temporal character; social mimicry could change the results tomorrow. People could be returning to their previous identities. Most pupils in schools are learning on basis of Catholic catechism, which could result in a transition to Catholicism. But this is not necessary. A changed global atmosphere could produce very different results.

It is far from my mind to insist on a religious identity as a value in itself; it should be the result of spiritual life. It should be a result of the opening of windows to other people and better communication. We must begin to think of church and confession as elements of stability within a society.

9. Would you agree that similar problems are present in Serbia, especially in the Vojvodina?

Oh yes, I agree completely. Serbia is also a multi-confessional society. That variety needs to be obvious in public opinion and culture, but it isn’t happening now. Religious faith is of course a private thing, but everyone has the right to display it publically.

10. In a surprise move, Metropolitan Jovan accepted Croatian citizenship in January. What does this say about present conditions?

Metropolitan Jovan never told me that he did not wish to come back to his country. He had listed some preconditions: "I would like my country to be free for all peoples. I would like for my country to be more democratic." Maybe he decided that the time to come was now and to participate in the creation of these conditions even though these elements had not been realized. If he was motivated by this, then his decision was indeed welcome and clever. This should give Serbs living here a new level of self-confidence and identity.
In the church here in Zagreb he said, "I am here to help bring peace and reconciliation to our states and people." If these are his real intentions, then he is very welcome. Many of us wish this step would have been taken earlier, but, as one says in English: "Better late than never."

An Orthodox periodical in Germany recently printed a poem about the Vukovar hospital during the 1991 war. One hears here in Croatia that more than 200 patients disappeared from that hospital and are presumed dead. This poem claims the exact opposite: That Serbs had liberated the hospital from fascists. More than once, Serbs have thrust books on the World War II Croatian concentration camp at Jasenovac into my hands. Are foreign Serbs hindering the process of reconciliation?

During this war, victims and tragic historical events have been misused with abandon. That poem about Vukovar's hospital is complete nonsense. Unfortunately, many people within the churches have been willing to forget Christian principles. The churches' top leadership should be criticizing the propagandistic way some priests recall historical tragedies.

If I understand Christianity well, many of these developments are completely against its principles. The churches are not here to produce hate—they are here to create bridges. Churches are here to clarify, not to foster uncertainty and hatred. Some priests and churches have forgotten elementary principles of the Bible.

There are so many profane elements within the present process of Rechristianization. So many elements are foreign to basic principles of the churches. The process of Christianization is being realized only on the surface.

We observe the strange phenomena that those who were yesterday the strongest enemies of the churches are now the strongest fighters for Catholicism or Orthodoxy. That should concern responsible people. Christianity is being used for self-absolution. It's a means for whitewashing one's own spotty past. I myself would like to be part of a church, but these developments are keeping me at a distance.

CROATIAN HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA

1. Yoder: Is it fair to say that Catholics in Banja Luka, in Serb-held Bosnia, are being persecuted?

Archbishop Franjo Perko: Yes, but it's covert. There's a similar situation here in Belgrade. There is no official persecution; it's just that the total atmosphere is anti-Catholic and anti-Croatian. We have no official bones of contention with the government, just as in
Banja Luka. But everyone is essentially against us; the plan for ethnic cleansing is proceeding.

2. Can you not place pressure on the Serb Bosnian government from here in Belgrade?

No, as I said, this all happens covertly. The government and the Orthodox church maintain that relations with the Catholics are correct and proper. [The Orthodox] Patriarch Pavle has condemned the destruction of churches and mosques.

3. But isn't the Patriarch also truly against the destruction of places of worship?

The patriarch is against the destruction of churches and mosques, but the Serbian church also supports the Serbian national plan. The plan for the creation of a Greater Serbia is the root cause of this war and everything else that has occurred.

Serbs argue that Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia have the right to self-determination. But this is only possible in cooperation with others who also live there. Not only Serbs can demand this right. The right to self-determination must apply to all nationalities. The Serbs have nevertheless attempted to resolve the issue through ethnic cleansing.

4. How do you judge the Orthodox church's refusal to accept a visit to Serbia by Pope John Paul II?

I was not surprised by this veto. Actually, they didn't say "no," but only "not now." The major Orthodox synod [the Sabor] does not convene until May. I know the Pope would like very much to visit Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Zagreb.

The Pope wants to foster peace in Bosnia and Croatia. But of course other interpretations abound here. One states that the Pope wants to dig a tunnel beneath Serbia and the Orthodox. It is therefore hard to imagine that the Orthodox church would ever agree to such a visit. I desire such a visit very much, but I also fear it because people are vehemently opposed to Catholicism and the Pope.

A book was just published in Belgrade with government blessing. It's entitled, The Vatican's Tunnels. [Perko laughs uproariously.] Everyone speaks of a Vatican-centered conspiracy. I believe no peace will come until this atmosphere changes, and there are no signs of that yet.

4. Have you said that three-fourths of the Catholics in northern Serbia (Vojvodina) have already left the country?
No, that refers only to the Belgrade diocese. When I came here seven years ago, there were 30,000 Catholics here. We now have 7-8,000. There were no native Catholics in this diocese; they were all immigrants from elsewhere. When the tensions set in, they fled quickly. But the Catholics in Vojvodina, most of whom are ethnic Hungarians, have been living there for centuries. Most of those who left Vojvodina were young men wanting to escape the draft. These included Croats and Hungarians, but also many Serbs.

5. How serious is the pressure on Catholics living in Vojvodina? There are few problems specific to our pastoral work. The registration of baptisms can be difficult, and the association of Catholic priests has been faced with bureaucratic hindrances. But one cannot claim that the religious rights of minorities are seriously jeopardized.

Matters are much more complicated in Kosovo where a large segment of the Albanian population is Catholic. Literature shipments and the construction of new churches are highly problematic. It's apparently a game for the authorities: The local government says "no," even after the federal government has said "yes." But the local "no" ends up overriding the federal "yes."

6. I recall the attack on the church building in Pancevo near Belgrade over a year ago. Are similar incidents still occurring?

No, the incidents have been quite minor and have decreased in the past year. They've smeared Serbian symbols outside on the door of our headquarters as well as "Death to Catholics" and obscenities. But we don't lend such incidents much weight: Young people are doing this.

7. Do you have allies in Serbia who are aiding you in your struggle? Are there no Orthodox believers who support you in your struggle for religious equality?

Well, everyone maintains that they're against the war. But what does it mean to be against this war? The Orthodox church has an interpretation very different from our own. They feel the Serbs had no alternative other than to defend themselves with war. But I believe the Serbs also possessed a [non-military] political option.

It's interesting that in war each side believes to be doing nothing more than defending itself. But if one party believes they are only defending themselves, then only the other side is required to stop. That's why this war just keeps on going.
8. Patriarch Pavle visited Banja Luka and Pale in Serb-held Bosnia last Summer. In Pale, he was present when his church presented a historic flag to General Ratko Mladić with the words: "With gratitude for your victories." Did you understand this as a strong partisan stance in favor of the Serbian cause in Bosnia?

This incident is not unusual. I have already said that the Serbian church supports the cause of Greater Serbia.

9. So you really believe that the partisan political loyalties of priests at the grass-roots level also apply to the Patriarch?

Yes, by all means. The Patriarch has simply said that we must remain humane in war, that we are not free to become criminals. The church supports the creation or defense of a Greater Serbia. Ex-Yugoslavia already was a kind of Greater Serbia.

We're after all dealing here with two sets of truths. Rump Yugoslavia only sees itself defending the rights of Serbs and regards itself as misunderstood by the outside world. But I claim that no one is against the Serbs per se. People are only against aggressive Serbia political position, and that is something very different.

I call for a UN protectorate in all of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I want all three parties to disarm, the return of refugees, and a genuine tribunal for war criminals. This protectorate would need to last 10–20 years. By that time, a new generation would have arisen who could be willing to coexist. The partitioning of Bosnia would only insure a never-ending war.