

# Church-State Relations in Yugoslavia: Recent Developments

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The part which religion and the Churches play in Yugoslav life, and the importance which the Yugoslav authorities attach to good Church-State relations, have been underlined by a number of recent conferences. A conference summoned by the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) in Belgrade last May was followed by one in Zagreb, and at the beginning of July by a consultative meeting of the Socialist Alliance in Sarajevo. At all these meetings the attitude of communists to religion, and to the activities of the Church in Yugoslavia, were discussed. The long delay in bringing republican legislation on Church-State relations into line with the 1975 Constitution, and the outspokenly sharp reaction of the religious press to some of the clauses in the draft laws, have undoubtedly been among the factors which have brought this subject into prominence. Slovenia and Bosnia-Hercegovina have enacted legislation which confirms basic religious rights, but prohibits the charitable and social activities which have been freely practised for some years. The reaction to this, particularly in *Glas Koncila* (Catholic) and *Pravoslavlje* (Serbian Orthodox) may well have persuaded the authorities to reconsider similar clauses in the proposed laws for other republics. For example, *Glas Koncila* last year published leaked information about a clause in the draft Macedonian law, which would have made religious education illegal for persons under 18. The clause seems to have been directed against Muslims, who are increasingly withdrawing their children from school at the earliest possible moment (usually about 15) and sending them to newly-established religious schools. *Glas Koncila's* report was picked up by *Vjesnik*, the leading Croatian government newspaper, and the resulting outcry from all religious bodies led to the hasty withdrawal of the whole draft.

Meanwhile, there is evidence that efforts are being made to improve the general atmosphere. The Slovene newspaper *Delo*, on 11 March 1977, published a full-page interview with the Archbishop of Ljubljana, Dr. Pogačnik, who expressed himself freely on a number of delicate questions, including the right of believers to be employed as teachers, the

right of any believer, no matter what his employment, to take part in his Parish Pastoral Council (an extension of church self-management which, the Archbishop pointed out, should be welcome to the authorities), and the pressing need for more churches and other religious buildings. He also repeated several times that conflict and tension existed largely at local levels, and hoped that the government would see that the goodwill which exists at the top was manifested at all levels.

The phenomenon to which the Archbishop was referring, *sectarianism*, is severely condemned by the Yugoslav authorities and the LCY, who equate it in their own ranks with clericalism among believers. One of the points made at the Belgrade conference was that communists have paid so little attention to religion and its legitimate forms of expression, that they either confuse these with clericalism, and respond with "administrative measures", or, by adopting a tolerant attitude to avoid conflict, give religious communities scope to realize their political and social aspirations. Communists need to study the activities of the various religious communities in different parts of the country, so that they can adapt their responses. "The aim", said Mitja Ribičič, former Foreign Minister, "should not be to separate the religious masses from the Churches overnight, but to separate them from the reactionary Church hierarchical influences, and to develop ties with them for the purpose of developing society as efficiently as possible." But Josip Vrhovec, a member of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the LCY, said:

... we cannot and should not ask citizens who have sincerely and with dedication joined the building of socialism to renounce their religion.

A later article in *Delo* (18 June 1977) develops this attitude much further. Boris Kutin, commenting on the conferences, writes that communists are atheists, not anti-theists; it is an aspect of socialist development and part of liberation in all fields to long for atheism; the struggle for religious freedom is linked to the struggle for all other freedoms of workers and citizens. One of the sociologists at Zagreb, Marko Kerševan of the University of Ljubljana, had posed the question of whether religion, like other social phenomena might survive the circumstances which gave it birth, but on different foundations, with a different message, in a classless society. Is religion by its essence alienated, he asks, or could it travel the same road as art and science? The dying out of religion, states Kutin, is simply an hypothesis of the Marxist theory of religion, not its aim; its aim is the transformation of social relationships, a classless society, not a society without religion. Only a non-religious anti-Marxist would assert that believers are digging their own graves, when they cooperate in the building of socialism; on the contrary, believers cooperate with Marxists in changing social relationships, because they see in this their own future, not the end of religion but its cleansing, its testing and

its acknowledgement as a phenomenon which goes beyond the limits of human relationships. The greatest need of today and tomorrow is an increase of self-management activities, Kutin continues, so it is essential to open wide all doors, especially the doors of the Socialist Alliance, to believers; the doors have never been closed, but often they have been only ajar. Too often people of goodwill have feared contact with believers, and the ill-intentioned have behaved bureaucratically. It is not enough, concludes Kutin, to enshrine the principle of religious freedom in the Constitution, and set up commissions for religious questions; communists must fight for real equality for believers.

All this reflects the contradictory strands in the attitude of the LCY and of the authorities to the Churches and believers. There are still hard-line, old-fashioned communists, especially at the local level and among ageing veterans of the liberation struggle, who want all-out opposition to the Churches and to believers, and, it must be said, these fossils have their counterparts among the less enlightened clergy. But there is a growing appreciation, among the leaders of the Party and government, of the need to enlist the support of all elements of society in developing a national consensus, and in fostering a sense of unity in the country during the critical period which will face it after Tito is no longer at the head of affairs.

July, 1977

#### SOURCES

*Tanjug* (official Yugoslav press agency) report of 6 and 7 June, 1977; *Radio Free Europe Background Report* 122; interview with Archbishop Pogačnik in *Socialist Thought and Practice* (Yugoslav) April 1977; *AKSA*, 15 and 29 April, and 24 June, 1977.

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## Annual General Meeting

TO BE HELD ON 14 JANUARY 1978  
AT KESTON COLLEGE