

Coexistence Between Church and State in Yugoslavia?

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Nearly three years ago a new illiberal course was adopted by the State in relation to the Roman Catholic Church, the second most important religious community in Yugoslavia. There are indications that relations are now deteriorating further.

On 16 September (1974) the official Yugoslav Tanyug agency reported that "a considerable quantity of hostile émigré literature" had been discovered at the editorial offices of *Druzina* ("Family"), the main Catholic weekly in the predominantly Catholic federal republic of Slovenia. The agency also reported that criminal proceedings had already been opened against those suspected of "having brought that émigré material into the country and having made unlawful use of it". In the same report, *Druzina* and its sister publication, the youth monthly *Ognjišce* ("Hearth"), were accused of "serious financial irregularities", also apparently the subject of criminal proceedings. On the same day, Mr. Rudi Cacinovic, Slovenia's vice-premier and chairman of the commission for religious affairs, summoned the republic's Roman Catholic bishops to a meeting, at which he warned them that "it was their duty to see that the Roman Catholic Church acts within the constitution and the law". Only a few days before, on 8 September, a senior Slovene Party official and former federal prime minister, Mr. Mitja Ribicic, had stated that he and his colleagues would "use every means at their disposal to stop the Church from establishing itself as an independent centre of political decision-making" in Yugoslavia.

This latest turn of events in Slovenia is certainly disturbing. Yet there is another side to the situation. The present admittedly precarious and fragile coexistence between the Roman Catholic Church and the Yugoslav State, codified under the 1966 protocol with the Vatican, may continue largely because Party leaders, in the present extremely uncertain political climate, are anxious to avoid a confrontation with the Church. Such a confrontation would undoubtedly introduce a new element of instability into the situation. The bishops, for their part, are trying hard to avoid providing a pretext for such a confrontation which could threaten the modest but solid gains made by the Church since 1966. In this situation, so full of contradictions and ambiguities,

both the pessimists and the optimists could in the end prove right.

Those who look upon the future of Church-State relations in Yugoslavia pessimistically can point to the Party's campaign against all "anti-socialist forces" – "liberalism", "nationalism" and other undesirable ideological forces in society, a campaign inaugurated by President Tito in December, 1971. If anything, the campaign has gathered momentum in the past years. Since the Churches fall into the category of ideologically unacceptable – if politically tolerated – forces, the hardening of the Party's anti-pluralist attitude at its tenth congress in Belgrade in May was a bad omen for them. At the congress, even Yugoslavia's self-management system was re-interpreted by senior Party figures (e.g. the Croat leader, Dr. Vladimir Bakaric) as "just another form of the dictatorship of the proletariat" in the class war which the Party must wage constantly. The strengthening of Party control in all spheres of life was to be the top priority. At the same time all the main leaders, from President Tito downwards, have been calling for a more consistent and rapid extension of the self-management system into all spheres of life. Such calls were a feature of the long public debate which preceded the adoption of the new federal constitution on 21 February, 1974. When, however, a group of Slovene Catholics at the opening of that debate in the summer of last year claimed for the Church the right to be heard as "a self-managing organization" within Yugoslavia's system of self-management, their initiative was attacked in the Party press as an attempt to gain a new political role for the Church. An open letter from all Roman Catholic bishops in Yugoslavia dated 11 October, 1973, which called for "the re-examination of the official view that religion is socially harmful", was called a "political provocation" in the main Party weekly *Komunist*.

The bishops felt obliged to write this open letter because, during the constitutional debate, the campaign against the "neutral school", and more specifically, against religious believers among teachers in schools and at the universities, had been intensified. The bishops were particularly disturbed by the case of Mrs. Cecilija Bajic, a schoolteacher in Sombor (Vojvodina, northern Serbia). In January 1973, Mrs. Bajic was debarred by the school Party committee from all teaching on the grounds of "having participated, together with her husband and children, in a religious ceremony (i.e. Mass), and thus of having acted contrary to the principles of the educational system in Yugoslavia". A few weeks before their open letter of October, 1973, the bishops had sent the federal assembly in Belgrade their comments on the draft of the new constitution, with the request that it should include specific guarantees against discrimination on the grounds of ideology and other human rights

guarantees. Their intervention and the subsequent open letter in October were sharply attacked. Their constitutional suggestions were ignored. Mrs. Bajic, far from being re-instated, was formally dismissed in October, 1973, and remains without an alternative post to this day. A month later, in November, a congress of Yugoslav educationalists in Ohrid (Macedonia) passed a resolution demanding that people with religious views be removed from educational posts altogether, and that applicants for such posts be vetted beforehand to ensure that they were ideologically sound. The final text of the new federal constitution, as adopted on 21 February, 1974, states in the preamble:

The system of upbringing and education shall be based on the achievements of modern science, especially of Marxism as the foundation of scientific socialism, and shall be instrumental in training young people for work and self-management and educating them in the spirit of the achievements of the socialist revolution, the socialist code of ethics, self-management democracy, socialist patriotism, brotherhood and unity, the equality of nations and nationalities, and socialist internationalism." (*The Constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia*, Belgrade, 1974, p.68)

This is the theory, in tune with the new ideological militancy adopted in December, 1971. In practice, too, incidents of religious intolerance and petty harassment have increased. Occasionally these have had unforeseen and even humiliating consequences for the Yugoslav government. One recent incident, which was widely publicized, occurred in Split (southern Croatia) in June this year. The local Church authorities had for long been bombarded with requests from local Catholic families, who wanted help in finding someone to look after their children (both parents had jobs). As elsewhere in Yugoslavia, the acute shortage of municipal crèches and kindergartens had led in Split to the widespread use of unqualified child-minders, often with unfortunate results. With many misgivings, the Church authorities finally relented and asked some nuns to help on an informal basis. But this provoked protests among hardline Party members, and in January this year the sisters were officially informed that they could no longer carry on this work: it was described as an "illegal activity usurping the functions of society". They appealed against the municipality's decision, but on 1 June their appeal was rejected by the higher authority in Zagreb. The sisters thereupon informed the parents that they could no longer look after their children. Unable to place their children in the already overcrowded municipal crèches and kindergartens, the desperate parents staged a sit-in in the Split town hall on 4 June. Then followed a press campaign:

some Belgrade newspapers claimed that the sit-in had been "led by priests in civilian clothes" and "master-minded by the nuns and their superiors". Nevertheless, under pressure from the public, the authorities gave way. An official of the Split municipality informed the sisters that they could continue to look after the children "until further notice", adding that this was purely an informal reprieve and that they would have to stop the moment places had been found elsewhere.

A letter to the main Catholic fortnightly in Zagreb, *Glas Koncila* ("Voice of the Council") dated June, 1974, described another case which caused an uproar among Catholics throughout Yugoslavia. The priest of a country parish in Croatia tried to administer the last rites to a 79-year old parishioner who had been sent to the military hospital in Zagreb. Since the man concerned and his family were practising Catholics, the priest was urged to go to Zagreb and minister to the dying man. But at the military hospital he was refused admittance. He refused to leave, demanded to see the director and was then physically manhandled and thrown out by two male nurses.

These instances of chicanery and harassment must be seen against the background of the trend away from the liberal policies of the 1960's in the political and ideological fields. The new course in many ways affects liberal communists more than Catholics and other religious believers. For example, there was an outcry in Serbia recently over the case of a man who was dismissed from his post as director of a health centre on the grounds that he was not a Party member. Although he was ideally suited to the post in every other respect, the decision to dismiss him was upheld.

Liberal communists look with envy at the Catholic and other religious publications as the last remnants of the former liberal era (i.e. before 1971). The Party press bitterly attacked *Glas Koncila* for its series of outspoken articles by the leading Roman Catholic theologian, Professor Tomislav Sagi-Bunic, on the subject of the new Yugoslav constitution and on "bourgeois atheism" as expressed in official Yugoslav Party publications and pronouncements. But their author still continues to write and publish. Nor have any copies of the paper been seized for nearly two years. True, its paper supply remains severely limited thus reducing the number of copies available for readers. Many more could be sold and the religious press could enjoy a continuing boom.

Such a situation irritates Party officials who express their annoyance in numerous newspaper attacks on the Church for its "meddling in politics". But top leaders shrink from a full confrontation with the Church. They probably calculate, as has already been suggested, that

this would simply turn the Church into a strong rallying point for all the opposition forces and transform many of the politically neutral or passive believers into active opponents of the government. This is an important consideration when the official Party leadership has to face new struggles against, for example, the pro-Moscow Stalinist elements. The discovery of a sizeable pro-Moscow group in Montenegro in the spring and summer of this year probably strengthens the view of those who believe that it is preferable for the Party to maintain a "low-profile" attitude towards the Church. These Party moderates believe that it is more profitable to play upon the differences between "conservatives" and "progressives" within the Church and on personal rivalries among bishops, than to unite them all overnight by strong attacks against the Church. The coming months will show whether the Slovene developments represent the beginning of a new and truly militant phase. However, it is significant that even Mr. Ribicic in his sharp attack on the Church of 8 September (see p. 8) was keen to stress that "nothing had changed in the basic Party position on religious freedom and the separation of Church and State formulated over 30 years ago during the national liberation struggle". Talks which Cardinal König of Vienna conducted in Yugoslavia in June with both the government and Church leaders have not yielded any reassurances on the future of Church-State relations in Yugoslavia. It is unlikely that the government will want to commit itself to a new Belgrade protocol in writing. But its practice may continue to belie its militant Marxist pronouncements – to the relief of the majority of the population.

APPEAL

Appeal for Anglican Church in Romania. The Bishop of Fulham and Gibraltar writes: "Earlier in this century there used to be over twelve Anglican churches in Russia and Eastern Europe, but today there is only one of them left in use and that is in danger of being lost. It is the Church of the Resurrection in Bucharest, Romania, which has recently been found to need extensive repairs to its roof (likely to cost up to £1,500). As this little church in Bucharest now has only a tiny congregation of regular worshippers, it would be impossible for it to be saved by the support of the local community alone, and I therefore appeal to churches, chaplaincies, individual Christians and well-wishers to rally to the aid of the Church of the Resurrection. Any donations or pledges of financial help to save this little church will be most gratefully received at Bishop's House, 19 Brunswick Gardens, London W8 4AS. Cheques should be made out to the 'Diocese of Gibraltar Bucharest Appeal'."