

## Yugoslav Press on Religion

*Contemporary Christian News Service (Aktualnosti Kršćanska Sadašnjosti).*

*AKSA* is a weekly Catholic news service published in Croatian in Zagreb by the organisation "Contemporary Christianity". It includes reports on items in the Yugoslav secular press.

### Controversy over New Mosque

Several newspapers reported that a new mosque in Zagreb was handed over for use to the Islamic community on 24 April 1987. According to *Dnevnik* (26.4.87) the official opening was due to take place on 6 September 1987. The building of the mosque has, however, been surrounded by controversy. The Belgrade fortnightly journal *Politikin Svet* (7.5.87) claims that the controversy centres round the contract signed between the Islamic religious community and the Peščenica commune in Zagreb, on whose territory the mosque stands. *Politikin Svet* carries a statement by the commune's legal representative to the effect that the Islamic community failed to adhere to original plans and erected a building for which no planning permission had been given. Consequently, both the mosque and its opening to the public are illegal.

### The Agrokomerc Financial Scandal

The big financial scandal involving the Bosnian enterprise *Agrokomerc* from Velika Kladuša produced far-reaching revelations with religious connotations in the media particularly after the resignation of the Vice-President of the Presidency of Yugoslavia Hamdija Pozderac, who is, like the protagonists in the

scandal, a Muslim. *Slobodna Dalmacija* (Split, 10.9.87), Zagreb Radio (10.9.87) and Zagreb TV (10.9.87) were the first to carry a *Tanjug* news item that the imams in Velika Kladuša and Cazin were called to a meeting with the local officials and advised to praise in their sermons the policies of *Agrokomerc* director Fikret Abdić which were not in step with the policies of the Federal Government. *Slobodna Dalmacija* called this "a crude manipulation of imams by politicians". On the other hand *Borba* (Zagreb, 12/13.9.87) and *Oslobodjenje* (Sarajevo, 13.9.87) carried a statement by an official in Cazin who admitted meeting the imams, but said that they discussed their departure for the opening ceremony of the new mosque.

The next step was taken by *Borba* (Zagreb, 18.9.87) which printed a statement by Vladimir Peić, Head of Department at the National Bank in Bosnia and Herzegovina, accusing the principals of *Agrokomerc* of establishing a local centre of a Middle Eastern religious and military organisation, with the aim of destabilising Yugoslavia. Peić stated that *Agrokomerc* contributed 3,500 million dinars to the building of the new mosque in Zagreb, that the enterprise had business connections with Iran and that it was true that the local imams had been induced to pray for and publicly support the Director Fikret Abdić. *Nedjeljna Borba* (Zagreb, 19/20.9.87) revealed more about the business connections with Iran when *Agrokomerc* published a denial that it had ever given any contributions to the new mosque but at the same time admitted that it had exported 2,000 tons of ritually

slaughtered broiler chickens to Iran in each of the years 1983 and 1984: this had involved the permanent presence of Iranian students in the slaughterhouse to supervise the proceedings. (AKSA 25.9.87.)

In an attempt to find the reasons behind the resignation of Hamdija Pozderac, who comes from a respectable Muslim family distinguished by its revolutionary tradition, the weekly *NIN* (Belgrade, 20.9.87) concludes that he took the decision because he felt that certain people in high positions hated him because he was a Muslim. In an interview published in the weekly *Danas* (Zagreb, 22.9.87) Pozderac reacted aggressively to the suggestion that there were people who believed that he was first and foremost a Muslim nationalist and that he was the principal driving force behind the revival of Islam in Yugoslavia.

As for the statement by Vladimir Peić which started it all, *Slobodna Dalmacija* (Split, 22.9.87) quotes the secretary of the Velika Kladuša League of Communists' Committee who called Peić a liar and said that he had already been expelled from the Party twice and will now be expelled for the third time. (AKSA, 25.9.87.)

### *Church-State Relations*

AKSA (March 1987) reports on an interview given by Cardinal Kuharić to the Catholic journal *Veritas*. The interview covered a whole range of topics, but church-state relations figured most prominently. Asked about improvements in these relations Cardinal Kuharić pointed out that public statements do not always correspond to reality and said that the socialist systems were based on Marxist ideology and atheism was part of that ideology. This, he said, created a series of problems for those individuals who refuse to accept that

ideology. The Cardinal pointed out that, contrary to public statements by high officials, declared believers were still barred from any higher position in public life. These were reserved, he said, for Party members, which meant that believers are treated as second class citizens. The Cardinal also complained that the media were free to attack the church, its representatives and the people's religious beliefs as such, without giving them the opportunity to reply. But the Cardinal pointed out that in Yugoslavia, compared to certain other socialist countries, the church enjoys complete freedom from official interference in her internal affairs. Nevertheless the church wished to go a step further, the Cardinal said, and was prepared to enter into a dialogue with the authorities on matters which concern believers, and this might involve some critical analyses. The church considered this to be her right and duty, said the Cardinal in conclusion. (AKSA 6.3.87.)

*Nedjeljni Vjesnik*, the main Zagreb Sunday paper, was quick to react (8.3.87) to the interview by Cardinal Kuharić commenting that the Cardinal's assessment of church-state relations was "pessimistic". But there is more to it than that, it said: when the Cardinal complained about the inequality of believers he meant that their *political* and not their religious freedom had been curtailed, which proves that the Cardinal attempted to meddle in politics making thereby the process of improving church-state relations more difficult. (AKSA 13.3.87.)

Another attack on Cardinal Kuharić appeared in *Večernje Novosti* (Belgrade, 10.3.1987), but this was an attack on his failure to mention in a speech that the population of Croatia incorporated a sizeable Serbian minority and on his attempts to rehabilitate the late Cardinal Stepinac as well as on his statement

about the status of believers. The Cardinal's statements were made at the beginning of the year and had already been attacked by the media at that time. (AKSA 13.3.87.)

#### *Archbishop's Christmas Message*

The broadcasting of Christmas greetings on Ljubljana Radio at Christmas 1986 has been discussed in the Yugoslav press. The broadcast was made by Archbishop Šuštar and Jože Smole, President of the Socialist Alliance of Slovenia. *Vjesnik* (Zagreb, 23.5.87) reported a meeting of the Federal Committee for Religious Affairs of the Socialist Alliance of Yugoslavia in Belgrade on 22 May 1987. The meeting ended without reaching a unanimous decision on the attitude to take regarding the broadcasts, but a representative of the Federal Government was quoted as saying that it was unconstitutional to allow representatives of religious communities to use the media for religious purposes. Another delegate replied that the same should apply to using the media for atheistic propaganda, because atheism, like religion, was a private matter for every individual. According to *Vjesnik*, opinions were just as divided at a meeting in Zagreb of the Croatian Assembly's Commission for Religious Affairs. A delegate from Serbia agreed that church leaders should be given the opportunity to broadcast their Christmas greetings, but another delegate said that Archbishop Šuštar's greetings had been openly political in content expressing Catholic church policy. *Dnevnik* (Novi Sad, 23.5.87) reported that several delegates taking part in the debate said that there should be no objection to the church leaders using the media for sending Christmas greetings to believers provided the greetings did not have any religious

[sic] content.

#### *Ecumenical Journal*

AKSA (July 1987) reports on the publication in Sarajevo of the first issue of a new religious periodical *Zajedno* published jointly by the Serbian Orthodox Priests', Catholic Priests' and Muslim Priests' Associations of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The periodical, initiated at a joint meeting on 22 April 1987, will be published at six-monthly intervals and the first issue contains 16 pages printed in both the Cyrillic and the Latin alphabet. The editorial points out that the need to promote good relations, tolerance and love between the members of different religious communities is even greater in Bosnia and Herzegovina than elsewhere in the country, because members of these communities live in such close proximity to each other. On 26 May 1987 in a special programme devoted to the new bulletin Sarajevo TV announced that the bulletin is to be printed in 3,000 copies to be distributed initially among the Associations' members only.

#### *Medjugorje*

The sixth anniversary of the appearance of the Madonna in Medjugorje on 25 June 1987 brought not only a great influx of pilgrims from all over the world, but also much media coverage and comment. The reports focused in particular on two aspects of the phenomenon: the millions lost by the Yugoslavs to foreign tourist agencies, and the controversy within the Catholic Church about the true significance of the visions.

The fact that, owing to the inactivity of the Yugoslav tourist agencies, foreign agencies had the field to themselves was pointed out in the

daily current affairs programme on Zagreb TV (14.6.87). *Glas Istre/Novi List* (Rijeka, 8/9.8.87) reprinted an article from *Većernje Novosti* (Belgrade) reporting the sensational calculations of some Italian journalists that Italian tourist enterprises have harvested a total of 10,000 million dollars since the pilgrimages began, which equals half of the total Yugoslav foreign debt. *Vjesnik* (Zagreb, 28.6.87) printed the same figure, but as turnover for the agencies rather than profit. Zagreb TV (25.6.87) gave the overall number of pilgrims to have visited Medjugorje as eight to ten million, predicting that between 300,000 and 500,000 pilgrims would pass through at the time of the anniversary.

The Yugoslav authorities are beginning to take note of the tourists, however. *Politika* (Belgrade, 8.8.87) reported that a Medjugorje Urban Development Plan had been adopted and a new tourist settlement with 300 beds was to be completed by the end of September. According to a piece in the same newspaper on 4 July 1987, the communal authorities intend to introduce a policy of registration of all foreign pilgrims, aimed at preventing the spread of AIDS by people suffering from the disease who might come to Medjugorje to seek a cure. (AKSA, 10.7.87).

The controversy over the visions within the Catholic Church was highlighted in a sermon by the Bishop of Mostar, Monsignor Pavao Žanić, to a group of young people being confirmed at Medjugorje on 25 July 1987. He said that in 1982 he

had nominated a special commission to study the events. The number of members of the commission was increased to 15 with nine theologians and two top psychiatrists. The commission sat for three years keeping the Holy See informed about its findings. After three years it took a vote; two members accepted that the appearances of the Madonna were genuine, one member abstained, and 11 declared that there was nothing supernatural there. The commission's conclusions had now been put to another commission nominated by the Conference of Bishops of Yugoslavia. Publicly censuring the local Franciscan parish priests for having organised pilgrimages before any decision by the church authorities on the authenticity of the visions, the Bishop even went so far as to pronounce that he was forbidding them to celebrate Mass anywhere within the boundaries of his diocese. (AKSA, 14.8.87.)

This speech aroused some comment in the press. The weekly *Danas* (Zagreb, 25.8.87) concluded an article on the Bishop's speech by quoting the Bishop's exclamation "Whatever are they doing to you, Mother of Jesus!", to which the paper added its own assumed reply, "They are making money, they are attracting people, they are playing politics, they are exploiting the religious beliefs of the masses and many other things, but all this is not to everybody's liking." (AKSA, 28.8.87.)

*Compiled by members of  
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