

The Nations and the Churches in Yugoslavia*

GEERT VAN DARTEL

This paper was originally a lecture I was invited to give to an audience of historians, economists and scientists. For me as a theologian this was an unusual experience. Like other westerners, the Dutch are not used to theologians contributing to debate about the identity of the state or nation. Since 1945 the Dutch have not had to worry much about their freedom, wellbeing or security; this fact might explain why there is in the Netherlands so little understanding of developments in Yugoslavia, especially over the past four or five years – developments that are deeply rooted in history and have led to the present catastrophe. So-called specialists on international affairs have spoken arrogantly on television about these ‘primitive’ nations in the Balkans, which are known mainly for their propensity to fight each other and commit limitless cruelties and atrocities. The most cynical among the commentators saw no better solution than to let the fire burn itself out. They suggested, in effect, a strategy of ‘wait and see’: in their view, ‘civilised’ Europe would be unable to settle the conflict in a peaceful way by diplomatic intervention or by any other form of economic or political pressure.

My reaction to this kind of ‘analysis’ was one of shock and shame. In my view, western specialists have an obligation to approach the historical background of the Balkans with respect, if not indeed with compassion, and to be rigorous in their analysis of the reasons for the emergence of the first and the second Yugoslav states and the reasons why those states were unable to remain united. Instead, superficial analyses of the Yugoslav crisis have dwelt on the ‘populism’ of the various Yugoslav leaders, the ‘primitivism’ of the peoples concerned and the ‘anachronism’ of the concept of the nation state, which is allegedly the objective of the different sides and the ultimate cause of war.

Between 1978 and 1983 I studied ecumenical theology at the Roman Catholic Theological Faculty in Zagreb under the guidance of the late Dr Josip Turčinović. The central topic I want to address is the relationship between national identity and religion. I have the feeling that hardly any subject is more controversial than this one. There are so many fixed and conflicting images and prejudices in this area that it might seem quite impossible to do the subject adequate justice. A lot depends of course on the point of view from which one is going to speak. A historian will try to give insight into the historical dimensions of that relationship, whereas a sociologist will throw light upon the socio-political and national structures in which religious communities function. For politicians, religious sentiments and religious communi-

*This article was originally presented as a paper at the conference ‘The Uncertain Future of Yugoslavia’ organised by the Clingendael Institute at Wassenaar, the Netherlands, 18–19 November 1991.

ties in a multinational state are often important only insofar as they can be seen as an instrument in the political struggle, and especially as an instrument for mobilising the masses. One might ask whether there is anything left for a theologian to say that is different from what is being said by others. As a servant of an institutional church and as a member of a nation, a theologian can easily become one-sided in his analysis and judgment. He may genuinely want to speak about the Word of God and to teach people about their origin and destiny from a religious perspective, but he can never escape completely from his historical context. Moreover, there is the constant danger that by using religious terminology in order to analyse and interpret historical processes and national conflicts he will sanctify the nation he belongs to or even the political position he stands for, so giving it an irrational dimension that is no longer subject to question. On the other hand, to demand a radical and thoroughgoing criticism of historical realities in the name of the purity of the Word of God would be asking too much. It would mean that the theologian had to cut off the branch he was sitting on, and in the end it would mean that he had to be indifferent to the fate of the people he belonged to. In my opinion, the position of the theologian in the Yugoslav context, where religion is a vital element in the national consciousness, is in the area between science and politics. It is from this standpoint that I am going to analyse the complex relationship between religious and national consciousness in the Yugoslav context, including the questions whether, and if so to what degree, religion is an element in or, worse, a cause of the present war, and also how much this war has to do with irreconcilable national frictions and tensions.

Preliminary Remarks

The first point to make is that the position of the religious communities – Orthodox, Islamic or Catholic – was never satisfactorily solved by the communist regime.¹ Although legislation on religion was certainly liberalised in the 1960s and 1970s, the communist party retained a deep animosity towards religion, as did the churches towards communist ideology and state power. In general one can say that none of the religious communities really felt free and at ease under communist rule. Apart from ideological and juridical reasons, the animosity of the state was caused by a rigid perception of the churches as potential centres of nationalist feeling. They were constantly under attack, pressurised and marginalised as enemy-figures. The Roman Catholic Church in Croatia was labelled ‘clero-nationalist’ and ‘clero-fascist’; the Serbian Orthodox Church was also labelled as extremely nationalistic. Post-war history in Yugoslavia was written from the political standpoint of the new state and facts that failed to fit were left out or distorted. The effect of writing history according to the interests of the victorious party was that the deep wounds dealt to relations between the nations in Yugoslavia never had the chance to heal, despite official slogans about brotherhood and unity. For more than 40 years the complexes and traumas that were very much present within the churches were kept under the surface. It was only when the communist power structure collapsed in the mid-1980s that suppressed feelings were able to come into the open; the consequence was a tremendous cultural and political shock for the entire country.

Secondly, it is well known that ecumenical relations between the Christian churches in the Yugoslav state have never been very intensive.² The Second World War is often cited to explain why in Yugoslavia – unlike Western European countries – there was no breakthrough leading to dialogue between theologians and church leaders. The Second World War is indeed one of the barriers, and until recently it was irremovable.

This is due, in part, to the above-mentioned political supervision of historiography and to contradictory interpretations of the war and the role of the churches in it by those very churches. In current Serbian propaganda against the Croats the Second World War is cited when the Croatian people and the Catholic Church are accused of genocide against the Serbian people, and this argument is also advanced by some leading Serbian theologians, such as Professor Dr Atanasije Jevtić, who was recently ordained bishop in the diocese of Banat.

Despite the dramatic effects of the Second World War, however, the problem of ecumenical relations between the churches should be placed in a far broader historical, cultural and geographical framework, one that transcends relations between the Croat and Serb nations. The core of the problem is that from the Serbian Orthodox perspective, and according to their reading of history, Catholic ecumenical initiatives in this century have in fact been attempts to undermine the Serbian Orthodox Church. For the Serbian Orthodox the policy of the Roman Catholic Church to extend its jurisdiction over the Balkans is seen as continuous since the Roman Empire split into two, an event eventually followed by the schism between eastern and western Christianity in the eleventh century. All attempts made over the centuries by the Catholic Church to restore ecclesiastical unity in the Balkans have in fact been seen as attacks on Orthodoxy and so as threatening to the identity of the Serbian people.³ Resistance to the idea of accepting unity with the Catholic Church has also of course received theological justification, in the course of which fundamental differences between the doctrines of the churches have been made clear. The idea that Catholicism threatens Orthodoxy is very much present in modern Serbian theology, as also in Greek and Russian theology. It often gives Orthodoxy a very defensive appearance. In the Catholic Church in Croatia, certainly over the past 30 years, there has been no great enthusiasm to engage in an ecumenical process with the Serbian Orthodox Church. But it is significant that none of those leading Catholic theologians who had a great respect for Orthodoxy and who did try hard to promote such a process, such as Professor Dr Tomislav Šagi-Bunić and the late Dr Josip Turčinović, was able to penetrate the barrier or to go beyond the level of friendly personal contact. They were in fact no more successful in their attempts than Catholic theologians from earlier times, such as Antun Franki, Bishop Josip Juraj Strossmayer or Fran Grivec, who also tried desperately and sincerely to overcome the gap between eastern and western Christianity.

As a counterpoint to the fixed image of Catholicism on the Orthodox side, there is also a fixed image of Orthodoxy on the Catholic side. The events of the past five years in Serbia have certainly strengthened this image. Orthodoxy, according to this view, cannot be understood without taking into account the Byzantine context in which it arose and flourished. When non-Orthodox use the word 'Byzantinism' to characterise the place of Orthodoxy in society, this is not meant as a compliment on the richness of Byzantine culture. On the contrary, it is used as a derogatory term, defining the position and role of the Orthodox Church as a servant of a state that is seen as despotic and antidemocratic. It is on the basis of this kind of image that many people in Yugoslavia have over the past few years come to the conviction that differences in cultural background – a Western European cultural tradition in the northern part of Yugoslavia and an Eastern Byzantine cultural tradition in the southern part – make it impossible for these nations to stay in the same state. It is noteworthy that the Islamic cultural tradition is always left aside when this matter comes up. The Islamic community does not fit into this scheme.

Thirdly, we must bear in mind that the process of modernisation, with its impact on

the mentality and world view of the population, has deeply affected Yugoslav society.⁴ The circumstances in which modernisation took place in Yugoslavia were in many respects different from those obtaining in Western Europe because of the presence of a monolithic system based on one party and an ideology hostile to religion. The churches were marginalised; they were allowed to live more or less quietly on the edge of society where they could maintain their own standards in private. Because of their isolation, however, they were unable to influence the process of secularisation, which had an enormous effect on the way of life and thinking of ordinary people in Yugoslavia. For various reasons, a large proportion of the population lost its ties with religion. The churches for their part were slow to develop new approaches to modern society. Too often they used the fact of communist rule as an excuse for shelving questions concerning the modernisation process in society and the response of the church through catechisation and preaching.

Here the churches have to be differentiated to some extent. Catholic theologians in Slovenia and Croatia made a start at least on tackling the problems of secularisation and looked for new approaches, whereas Serbian theologians completely denied the problems of modernisation and secularisation, perhaps as a consequence of their image of religious truth as fixed and static. Orthodoxy comes out still more negatively as far as religious education is concerned. Whereas the Catholic Church was very active in organising religious education in the parishes, and also developed and published new catechetical material, in the Orthodox Church religious education, at least of a systematic kind, was hardly known. Moreover, attendance at mass or liturgy – evidence as to the liveliness of the church – has over the past few decades been much higher in the Roman Catholic Church than in the Serbian Orthodox.

Although none of the churches was able to arrest the processes of secularisation, a much more determined attempt to cope with them was made in the Catholic Church than in the Serbian Orthodox Church. And any church that takes modernisation and secularisation in society seriously soon realises that precisely as a consequence of these processes it is impossible for the church to lay exclusive claim to the identity of man, let alone to the identity of an entire nation. In my view, the Serbian Orthodox Church still tends to do this, whereas the Catholic Church in Croatia, after tendencies in this direction at the beginning of this century, does not do so any more.

The Churches and the State

From these remarks, each of which ought to be elaborated much further, it will be clear how much potential friction exists between the Christian churches in Yugoslavia, and to what extent these tensions are interwoven with national sentiments and traditions. Whoever wants to give the conflict in the Yugoslav state a religious shape, then, has plenty of material at his disposal. On the other hand, when one looks at the actual strength of the churches in Yugoslav society, one has to acknowledge that to hold them largely responsible for the onset of the current crisis is untenable. What the churches can be blamed for, perhaps, is that they did not offer enough resistance to various political developments within the state. As these developments made war ever more inevitable, political leaders tried to make use of religious and national sentiments to legitimise it. But here too analysis will have to differentiate. Matters have gone too far for observers to be able simply to shrug their shoulders and say that everyone has made mistakes and that everyone is equally guilty – as has often been suggested in the western media. It is frequently said that the Balkans, including the churches, are in the grip of intolerant nationalism. Under communism, the accusation

of 'nationalism' was used in the interest of the status quo and against the legitimate rights and aspirations of the nations towards self-determination. In the democratic societies of Western Europe it seems that the accusation of 'nationalism' is often used as an excuse for not tackling the basic questions in the Yugoslav drama.

We need further analysis, then, in order to arrive at a more accurate understanding of the place of the churches in the national question. Instead of presenting a short history of the relationship between national and religious consciousness I will start from the actual state of affairs today, in which of course history is very much present. The thesis I am going to defend is as follows. The Roman Catholic Church in Croatia as well as in other parts of the Yugoslav state has gone beyond a narrow identification between national and religious consciousness and resists, on the basis of its own vocation as a church, a role as simply a tool of state politics. It thus accepts the cultural plurality of (Croatian) society as well as the principles of a democratic system, and does everything it can to prevent religion itself becoming an element in the war. The Serbian Orthodox Church, on the other hand, obsessed as it is by the tragic fate of the Serbian people in history, understands itself as the ultimate protector of Serbian national identity, an understanding which culminates in a theology of the Serbian nation, known as '*svetosavlje*', and which might explain the uncritical stance the Serbian Orthodox Church has taken towards the aggression of the Serbian political leaders and the Yugoslav army against Croatia, even going so far as to legitimise it by stressing that for the second time this century the Serbian population in Croatia is threatened with genocide.

The Catholic Church in Croatia

It is of course true that Croatian history too provides examples of strong identification between religious and national identity.⁵ This was the case both in the regions where Croats lived under the Ottoman regime and in the regions within the Habsburg empire where from the end of the seventeenth century Serbs and Croats lived together and where religion functioned as a distinctive feature of their respective national identities. It was, however, never to the same degree the case in the northern (Zagorje) or western (Istria, Dalmatia) parts of Croatia. And although such an identification existed, and the Catholic Church was one of the important elements in the formation of Croatian national identity and its preservation in times of crisis, it is untrue either that Catholicism in Croatia is seen as the fundamental or exclusive basis of the nation, or that the Catholic Church played or had any intention of playing a decisive role in politics as the ultimate political representative of the Croatian nation.

Anyone who looks at all deeply into the developments of the past 20 years or so will notice a basic contradiction between, on the one hand, an unending stream of accusations of nationalism and political clericalism directed against the Catholic Church and, on the other, the statements of Catholic church leaders, which have always been based on distinctions drawn between church and nation and church and state.

The greatest problem contributing to the tense relationship between the Catholic Church and the Yugoslav state is the fact of two totally different interpretations of the role of the Catholic Church in the Second World War. After the war the communist state put the Archbishop of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac, on trial because of alleged collaboration with the fascist regime of Ante Pavelić, and condemned him to 16 years' hard labour. In the Catholic Church, however, veneration for the Archbishop, elevated to Cardinal in 1953, constantly grew because of his courageous stand during

the war against the atrocities committed by the Pavelić regime against Serbs, Jews and Gypsies, and because of his unbending attitude towards the new rulers, who tried very hard but unsuccessfully to enlist the Archbishop's support for a Croatian national Catholic Church that would be independent of Rome.⁶ It is important to be clear about Stepinac's position. After the failure of the first Yugoslav state he was certainly in favour of an independent Croatian state. At the time this view was shared by the overwhelming majority of the population after 20 years' experience of a Yugoslav state dominated by Serbia. That the Croatian people were at the same time deceived by Pavelić, who was driven by hatred of the Serbs, became clear from the moment his fascist regime came to power. During the war Stepinac took a stand against fascist ideology and especially against the crimes committed by the *ustaša*, *četniks* and others. He never questioned the right of the Croatian people to an independent state, however, and as a Croat he was above all worried about the state of the Croatian people.⁷

I would argue that this broadly remained the line followed by the Catholic Church in Croatia in the second Yugoslav state, dominated as it was by the communist party: the church produced a view of society that was integrated with the issue of human rights and the principles of democracy. An ambivalent attitude towards the Yugoslav state itself was a logical consequence, partly because of the animosity of communist power and ideology towards religion as such, and partly because in this state fundamental problems concerning the national question were never solved in a satisfactory way. But what is important here is to understand that it is political problems that are at stake and not religious ones. Although it was not satisfied with the new order of the Yugoslav state the Catholic Church did not go into revolt against it. It neither blessed it nor condemned it, but concentrated on the elementary tasks of the church, preaching, celebrating and organising religious education and, where possible, charitable work. The activity of the Roman Catholic Church over the past 30 years, within the limited possibilities of the prevailing legislation on religion, is really remarkable. The church succeeded not only in surviving but, albeit to a modest extent, in renewing in many respects its theological thinking and catechesis, notwithstanding the fact that secularisation was affecting society deeply. In all this it is important to note that the Catholic Church never gave priority to any sort of political role for itself, but focused its attention primarily on purely religious activity.

It was only in the 1980s that the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia became involved again in political discussion. This involvement was, however, at least at the beginning, based not primarily on national sentiments, but on human rights issues and the longing for democracy.⁸ The first political statements concentrated on the situation in Kosovo, which was deteriorating rapidly after 1987. The fact that the Catholic Church in Croatia as well as in Slovenia protested against the violation by the Serbian government of the human rights of the Albanian population in Kosovo led to growing tensions with the Serbian Orthodox Church, which had an entirely different view of the Kosovo problem.⁹ The same happened in the course of the democratic renewal process within Croatia, which inevitably involved bringing up the question of the restoration of Croatian sovereignty. From the Serbian Orthodox side this was seen as a threat to the rights of the Serbian minority;¹⁰ from the Catholic side it was seen as the realisation of legitimate rights.¹¹ Although the entire process of democratic renewal in recent years, then, has been seen from the point of view of the Catholic Church as a political process, it has certainly had a profound influence on the relations between the different Christian confessions. Different perceptions and different ways of political thinking have really led to great confusion here.

These relations have deteriorated further because of the war. It is quite clear that in Croatia there is a common view about who bears the responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities, and it is a view shared by the leaders of the Catholic Church, various church bodies like *Justitia et Pax*, and the Catholic community as a whole. The Serbian government and the Yugoslav army in combination with militant Serbian groups are held responsible for aggression against Croatia with the aim of conquering a large part of Croatian territory. Through its own channels the Croatian Catholic Church advocates recognition of the independence of Croatia and Slovenia on the grounds that as a result of a democratic process they have chosen to become sovereign states.¹² At the same time, in numerous declarations, church leaders warn against national hatred, and attempt to keep the way open for ecumenical cooperation, trying not to blame the Orthodox Church and certainly not the Serbian people as such. On the other hand, the Catholic Church is not advocating pacifism, but stands on the position that the Republic of Croatia has the right to defend itself against aggression.¹³ The war in and against the Republic of Croatia has involved huge devastation that seems to be aimed systematically at the destruction of Croatia's cultural heritage, including a vast number of churches. At the same time, European response has been sluggish. These factors have called forth language and image reminiscent of those used in contemporary Serbian Orthodox theology: there is talk, for example, of the Golgotha of the Croatian nation.

The Serbian Orthodox Church

For the Serbian Orthodox Church the distinctions between church and nation and between church and state are far less clear than in the Roman Catholic Church. The main Serbian Orthodox theologians of this century, like Nikolaj Velimirović, Justin Popović, Atanasije Jevtić and others, developed their theological concepts on the basis of the idea that Serbian Orthodoxy forms the heart of the Serbian national identity and that from a historical perspective the Serbian nation is under constant threat.¹⁴ In the view of the leading contemporary Serbian theologians the threat comes mainly from two sides.¹⁵

Firstly, it comes from the south, as a result of the aspirations of the Albanians trying to create an ethnic Albanian republic in Kosovo, the heartland of the medieval Serbian kingdom and church, the Serbian Motherland or Holy Land. Atanasije Jevtić, in particular, has written extensively about permanent discrimination against the Serbian population in Kosovo during the course of this century. He characterises this as genocide. He began writing on these lines in church periodicals years before the shift in Serbian policy towards Kosovo took place. Secondly, the threat comes from the north. In the opinion of the Serbs, the Croats and especially the Roman Catholic Church have been trying for centuries to solve the 'Serbian problem' in Croatia, either through an ecclesiastical union of the Serbian Orthodox Church with Rome or by brutal expulsion or extermination (1941–5). Significantly, Serbian theologians analyse their national history within a theological framework. For an understanding of Serbian history they always go back to the life of Saint Sava, the son of the founder of the medieval Serbian state, Stefan Nemanja. Sava himself played an important role in the constitution of the Serbian kingdom in the thirteenth century. His main significance, however, was that he organised the Serbian Orthodox Church within the Byzantine religious tradition, at a time when the schism between eastern and western Christianity was already a fact. Subsequent historical developments saw the political significance of the Serbian church increasing because under Ottoman rule it had to

take over the role of political representative of the Serbian people.¹⁶ As protector of Serbian national identity it was of course a logical development that Serbian Orthodoxy should adopt a hostile attitude towards the Islam that was propagated among the Serbian population as well as towards a Catholicism which it saw as undermining Orthodoxy.

In this century, and especially from the 1920s, leading Serbian theologians have tried to revitalise the inheritance of Saint Sava, presenting him as the conscience of the Serbian people and their guide for the future. They have produced a set of teachings known as *svetosavlje*. This has not been a rigorous exercise from the historico-critical point of view, in the sense that polemical attitudes towards Islam, Catholicism and western culture in general, which date from historical periods subsequent to the life and work of Saint Sava, have simply been integrated into *svetosavlje*. The aim of this theology of the nation was first of all to provide an ideological focus for the Serbian people, who live not only in Serbia itself but dispersed over the whole territory of Yugoslavia. More specifically, this ideological concept has been used in order to overcome the gap between the church and the Serbian intelligentsia: as in nineteenth-century Russia, the latter is very much alienated from its religious roots and flirts with western patterns of philosophical and political thinking. A religious concept aimed at inspiring the Serbian nation has tended to hinder the task of reaching a new understanding among the various confessions and religions in the Balkans, which in fact share a tragic history. In the 1980s this process has continued. While ecumenical relations have come under increasing pressure, leading Serbian theologians and Orthodox intellectuals have stressed the importance of reconciliation within the Serbian nation and church as a function of the common national interest of Serbia. A higher priority has been given to reconciliation between Serbian communists and Serbian Orthodox than to reconciliation between religious Serbs and Croats. A matter of great concern to Serbs was the schism within the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1962–3, which for political reasons led to the creation of the Serbian Orthodox Church of America.

At the same time that ecumenical relations have been practically broken off, leading Serbian theologians, in line with the work of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović and Dr Justin Popović, have concentrated on the chronic suffering of the Serbian people, for which in this century Muslim Albanians and Catholic Croats have been largely held responsible. As mentioned earlier, Dr Atanasije Jevtić in particular has written about the martyrdom of the Serbian nation in Kosovo and Jasenovac, accusing the Albanian and Croatian peoples in equal measure of genocide against the Serbs. His interpretation of recent history – an interpretation that leaves very little space for ecumenical dialogue – eventually prevailed in the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church. In the 1991 letter signed by Patriarch Pavle and all the bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the suffering of the Serbian nation in Jasenovac is called the sin of all sins and in fact put on the same level as the suffering of Christ.¹⁷ Over the past few years numerous declarations have been issued by Orthodox church leaders protesting against alleged discrimination against Serbs in Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, and so in fact confirming from the position of the church the broader propaganda about the genocidal intentions of non-Serbian nations in the Yugoslav state towards the Serbs. Ecumenical initiatives that have led to joint statements by religious leaders of different confessions aimed at defusing escalating tensions have not been able to counterbalance the mainstream message from the Orthodox Church. Even in international ecumenical organisations like the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches, Serbian representatives speaking about

Yugoslav matters have often given the current tensions and conflicts a religious dimension, blaming Islamic fundamentalism for alleged discrimination against Serbs in Kosovo¹⁸ and the Roman Catholic Church for giving support to what they see as a neo-fascist Croatian state.

Although the Serbian Orthodox Church certainly cannot be accused of having been pro-communist it definitely played a role in the establishment of the aggressive policy of the Serbian republic under Milošević, whose main targets in realising his national programme have been Kosovo and Croatia. It is a painful fact that Serbian Orthodox bishops have not only spoken out in favour of the interests and rights of the Serbs in Croatia but have also quite openly supported Serbian soldiers in, for example, Borovo Selo and Knin, through direct contacts shown on television.

In my opinion, then, the Serbian Orthodox Church has been a useful tool of Serbian policy, mainly in the area of propaganda, in connection with both the annexation of Kosovo and the confrontation with Croatia. On the other hand, one should take into account the relative weakness of the Serbian church in society. I am convinced that it was not primarily Serbian theologians who developed the new ideological framework for Serbia's current policy, nor is it thanks to the church that Milošević in his first years received such widespread support from the Serbian population. The church was drawn into this dreadful game relatively late. It is Serbian historians in particular who have created and sustained over the years the myth about the endless suffering of the Serbian nation and the genocidal ambitions of the Croats directed against the Serbs with support from the Vatican and other powerful organisations. They have exaggerated the number of victims in the Second World War and in a quite one-sided manner have accused only the Croats of atrocities during the war.¹⁹ What Serbian theologians have done is simply to adopt the findings of this type of scholarship and to give it a theological legitimisation. It is by now well known that the national policy of Milošević was formulated within the Serbian Academy of Sciences in the famous Memorandum of 1986.²⁰ Far more significant than the church in generating mass support for Milošević were the Serbian media from 1987 onwards. It is scientists, intellectuals and journalists, then, who to a far greater extent than churchmen have contributed to the success of Milošević. Those who from the beginning were critical of the new policy, like the architect and artist Bogdan Bogdanović and others, were marginalised or denied a public voice.²¹

Conclusions

I am convinced that this war has nothing to do with Christianity, neither in its Orthodox nor in its Catholic form. It is very hurtful, however, to see how religion is drawn into it and how religious leaders have been powerless not only to stop the war itself but even to reverse the processes of alienation. It is not the case that the most responsible of the church leaders have not made the attempt to produce common witness against this war; but their efforts have not altered the march of events and perhaps they were even of rather ambivalent significance in a situation where mutual trust is so obviously lacking. At their meetings in Sremski Karlovci on 7 May 1991 and in Slavonski Brod on 24 August, Cardinal Kuharić and Patriarch Pavle did nevertheless clearly demonstrate that they were very much opposed to a military solution of the political conflict and that they were in favour of a process of reconciliation between the nations and the churches.²²

I am similarly convinced that the war does not prove that Serbs and Croats cannot live together. What is at issue here is the question of how far a tyrannical regime can

succeed in taking its own people as hostages and mobilising them for a war against all other nations in the same state. Growing protest in Serbia against the war and the policies of Milošević, desertion and non-obedience to mobilisation calls have certainly saved the self-respect of many Serbs and give reason for some hope. But matters have gone so far that the policies of Milošević may well rebound and lead to chaos in Serbia itself; and it is of course clear that a democratic change in Serbia will now be insufficient to save the Yugoslav state.

I foresee difficult times for the Serbian Orthodox Church in particular. It will inevitably be confronted with the need to reassess its anachronistic view of the relations between church, nation and state, and the myth, nurtured by Serbian theologians, of the martyrdom and non-aggressiveness of the Serbian people and the genocidal tendencies of other peoples. At the present moment, the church would gain much credit if it were to voice open and radical criticism of the Serbian regime and show signs of solidarity with all who are victimised by this senseless war irrespective of nationality or religion.

In my view, it is not correct to describe the Serbian Orthodox Church simply as a state church, a tool in the hands of state power, as Tomislav Vuković did in his recent book on the Serbian Orthodox Church during the Second World War.²³ Orthodox spirituality, firmly rooted in early Christianity, is in no way derived from the power of the state. In Serbian history, however, the tension between these two strands in Orthodoxy, the political and the spiritual, has frequently, and especially in times of crisis, been resolved in favour of political opinion according to the national interest and to the detriment of spiritual richness. This kind of tension between the political and the spiritual realms is characteristic of the main figures of the Serbian church throughout its history, of Saint Sava as much as of Nikolaj Velimirović and Atanasije Jevtić in the present century. It is also characteristic of the present patriarch, Pavle, who before his election was very much honoured as a non-political spiritual authority, not only by the Orthodox but also by Muslims and Catholics in Kosovo and Croatia. After his elevation to patriarch on 1 December 1990, he tried sincerely to stimulate improvement in interconfessional relations and reconciliation between the nations. At the same time, however, he became increasingly involved in politics through his official appearances on occasions like the *parastos* for the *četnik* leader of the Second World War, Draža Mihailović, and the controversial installation of the Serbian bishop Lukijan in the new Serbian Orthodox eparchy of Dalj, only a few weeks after the massacre in Dalj in August 1991. A letter to Lord Carrington signed by the Patriarch²⁴ is of central significance here. The Patriarch writes to the Chairman of the Peace Conference that the Serbian population in Croatia is for the second time this century being threatened with genocide and that the Serbs have no choice but to leave this 'new NDH' (the initials of the Independent Croatian State, 1941–5) or fight with weapons for the right to live in a single state with the entire Serbian people. He further argues that it is impossible for the Serbs to live in a Croatian state: 'It is time it was understood that the victims of genocide and their previous and perhaps future executioners cannot live together any longer. After the Second World War nobody forced the Jews to live with the Germans in the same state. The Serbs, however were forced to live with the Croats.' Are the Serbs, then, the Jews of the Balkans? The Patriarch's comparison is not a new one. During his imprisonment in Dachau, Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović wrote meditations and speeches to the Serbian people on the theme of relations between the West and East, between Catholics, Orthodox and Jews, constantly stressing that Serbia must turn away from 'Jewish Europe', as he called it, in order to return to her own religious traditions and find her vocation as the new people of God, the new Israel.²⁵

Postscript

This article was originally written in November 1991. Since then there have been important developments. An international peacekeeping force was eventually sent to Croatia, and the independence of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina recognised. These measures failed, however, to stop the escalation of violence. At the beginning of April 1992 full-scale war broke out in Bosnia-Herzegovina; the devastation of towns and villages and the suffering of the population there already seem to exceed those experienced in Croatia. The one and a half million Bosnian Serbs, who are by no means unanimous in their support for aggression against the republic, are faced with agonising choices.

Since the enforcement of sanctions by the United Nations against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – which in fact means Serbia and Montenegro – awareness has been growing, especially within Serbia, that the policies of the Milošević government are likely to lead to self-destruction. The most important Serbian national institutions – the Serbian Academy of Sciences (which with its Memorandum of 1986 played an important part in the formulation of the programme pursued by Milošević) and the Serbian Orthodox Church – have openly taken a stand against Milošević. In its declaration of January 1992 the Holy Synod disputed the right of the Milošević regime to act in the name of the Serbian people without the approval or blessing of the Serbian Church. On 15 May a long article in *Pravoslavlje* rejected as illegal the new constitution of the Yugoslav state, and asserted that only a constitutional parliamentary monarchy could guarantee Serbia's stable political and economic development. On 14 June, the feast of Pentecost, Patriarch Pavle led a march and prayers for peace in Belgrade. More than 10,000 people took part; church bells were ringing throughout the city as a sign of protest against the Milošević regime.

The fact that the Serbian church has now taken this stand is very important. It does not mean, however, that the church has changed its position on what it regards as 'Serbian lands' in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina or on the situation of the Serbian minority in these republics. The main Serbian Orthodox journal *Pravoslavlje* continues to devote as much space as before to the past and present sufferings of the Serbian people, while very little is said about the sufferings of Muslims, Croats or Albanians. The present policy of the Serbian Orthodox Church can best be seen as an attempt, in cooperation with the Academy of Sciences and the political opposition, to save Serbia from impending catastrophe. The isolation of Serbia in the international community has opened the way to possible military intervention from abroad, and the failure of the policies of the Milošević regime has sharply increased the danger of conflict and chaos within Serbia itself.

Divisions between the nations and the churches in Yugoslavia are profound. Relations have been poisoned at all levels. In the middle of a war, it is certainly too early to talk about healing processes. I do not believe, however, that these divisions are laid upon the nations of the former Yugoslav state by fate or that they are the consequence of any so-called 'primitivism' of the peoples concerned. To a great extent they have been created by an evil form of political and ideological propaganda. One should not therefore look in the first instance to lay blame on the people or the churches, who have merely been objects in this campaign of hate, but on those who have directed the campaign itself. As a Catholic theologian I am convinced that Catholicism and Orthodoxy must and can work together and that both confessions have a responsibility, and a role to play, in the reconciliation of nations irrespective of the states they live in.

Notes and References

- ¹ Stella Alexander, *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945* (Cambridge University Press, 1979); Pedro Ramet, 'The Serbian Orthodox Church', in Pedro Ramet (ed.), *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Duke University Press, 1988), pp. 232–48.
- ² In Bosiljka Milinković, *Bibliography on Religion, Church and Atheism 1945–1985* (Zagreb, 1986) there are listed only 120 titles dealing with ecumenical themes. These are mainly short articles in church periodicals, most of them written by Catholic authors from Slovenia and Croatia. This may indicate how little ecumenical relations have been subject to intensive study and discussion. The most relevant ecumenical encounters and reflections took place at the ecumenical symposia of the Catholic and Orthodox theological faculties that were organised every two years from 1974. The lectures delivered at these meetings have been published over the years by the theological faculties in Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade, which organised the symposia. A serious reflection on ecumenical theology can be found in the works of Professor Dr Tomislav Šagi-Bunić: *Ali drugog puta nema* (Zagreb, 1972); *Vrijeme Suodgovornosti* (vols I and II, Zagreb, 1981–2). The work of Dr Juraj Kolarić is also interesting. His book *Pravoslavni* (Zagreb, 1985) has been heavily criticised by Serbian Orthodox theologians. In the Serbian Orthodox Church, alongside some moderate and quite positive approaches towards the ecumenical movement, for example from authors like Dimitrije Dimitrijević and Čedomir Drašković, a very polemical line is also followed. This was initiated by Dr Justin Popović with his work *Pravoslavna crkva i ekumenizam* (Solun, 1974). In *Pravoslavlje*, the main church periodical of the Serbian Orthodox Church, there recently appeared a serious attack on the ecumenical movement in the shape of an article by Rodoljub Lazić, 'Pravoslavna crkva i ekumenizam' (*Pravoslavlje*, vol. 25, no. 585–6 (1991), p. 8). A more sober overall survey of the ecumenical scene has been written by the sociologist of religion Petar Cebić, *Ekumenizam i vjerska tolerancija u Jugoslaviji* (Belgrade, 1988).
- ³ This is confirmed by numerous articles in *Pravoslavlje* and the periodical *Glas Crkve* published in Sabac, as well as by the reprinting in 1985 by the Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade of the book by Dr Nikodim Milaš *Slavenski apostoli Kiril i Metodije i istina pravoslavlja*, originally published in Zadar in 1881.
- ⁴ See, for example, the research report by Jordan Aleksić and Furio Radin, *Položaj, svest i ponašanje mlade generacije Jugoslavije* (Belgrade and Zagreb, 1986). Many works by sociologists of religion like Esad Ćimić, Valter Dermota, Nikola Dugandžija, Jakov Jukić, Marko Kerševan, Zdenko Roter, Srdjan Vrcan and others are also of interest.
- ⁵ Professor Dr Tomislav Šagi-Bunić, *Katolička crkva i hrvatski narod* (Zagreb, 1983), especially pp. 21–103.
- ⁶ Stella Alexander, *The Triple Myth: a Life of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1987).
- ⁷ Croatian historians do not deny the genocidal policy of the Pavelić regime, especially against the Serbian population in the independent state of Croatia during the war. On the contrary, they are aware of this shameful episode. But they oppose the thesis that the Croatian nation as such is genocidal by nature – a thesis advanced by many historians and scholars who exaggerate the number of war victims, neglect the role played by Croats in the resistance against fascism and seem to ignore the fact that the *četniks* in Bosnia and South Croatia were as 'genocidal' in their struggle against the Croatian population as the *ustaša*. Tudjman's sin in post-war Yugoslavia was that he wrote about these complex questions in a way that did not suit the state (Franjo Tudjman, *Bespuća povijesne zbiljnosti* (Zagreb, 1990)). The Catholic Church has made modest attempts to start a reconciliation between Serbs and Croats in this area. An important statement was made by Bishop Pihler in 1963: 'In this country, during the last war, many of our Orthodox brothers were killed just because they were Orthodox. Those who committed these murders were baptised and were called Catholics. These Christians have killed other people, also Christians, because they were not Croats and Catholics. With pain we admit this terrible error of these lost people, and we beg our brothers of the Orthodox faith for forgiveness, as Christ on the cross has forgiven all.'

Also we forgive all who have perhaps hated us and who have done injustices to us.' In his letter to Patriarch German and the Holy Synod on 12 November 1990, Cardinal Kuharić wrote: 'We regret and condemn all crimes that sons of the Croatian people, on whatever side or under whatever flag they were, have committed against the Serbian and other peoples.'

- ⁸ For an insight into the engagement of the Catholic Church in Croatia over the past ten years, see the main church periodicals, *Glas Koncila* and *Aksa*, both edited in Zagreb; see also 'De katholieke kerk in Joegoslavië, baken of rif in een op drift geraakte samenleving?', in Cor Arends and Geert van Dartel (eds), *Katholieken in Oost-Europa* (Kampen, 1989), pp. 124–41.
- ⁹ This view can be found in periodicals like *Pravoslavlje* and *Glas Crkve; Zadružbine Kosova, spomenice i znamenja srpskog naroda* (Prizren-Belgrade, 1987); Atanasija Jevtić, *Od Kosova do Jadovna* (Belgrade, 1987); Dimitrije Bogdanović, *Knjiga o Kosovu* (Belgrade, 1986).
- ¹⁰ See the message of the Serbian Orthodox bishops and priests in Croatia, 'Mir i ljubav božijem narodu', *Pravoslavlje*, vol. 24, no. 565 (1990), p. 1; a similar message came from the Serbian Orthodox bishops in Bosnia-Herzegovina some months later: 'Saopštenje srpskih pravoslavnih episkopa', *Aksa*, no. 47 (1990), pp. 15–16.
- ¹¹ 'Izjava kardinala Kuharića povodom proglašenja suverenosti republike Hrvatske', *Aksa*, no. 26 (1991), pp. 2–3; 'Izjava slovenske biskupske konferencije prigodom proglašenja samostalnosti Slovenije', *Aksa*, no. 26 (1991), p. 3.
- ¹² 'Pismo hrvatskih biskupa biskupima cijelog svijeta', *Aksa*, no. 12 (1991), pp. 12–13. The declaration of the Bishops' Conference held in Zagreb on 15–16 October 1991 puts it quite clearly: 'At our episcopal conference, having considered the serious toll in human life and extensive war damage, we again categorically condemn these war crimes and express our support for a democratic approach to the solution of political problems. We demand that the following be respected: the right of self-determination of peoples, the rights of ethnic minorities and the inviolability of borders, as based on the United Nations declarations, the Helsinki documents and the Charter of Paris. We approve of and accept the decisions of our peoples to assume statehood and sovereignty of their respective republics through referendum, plebiscite or in some other legal manner. Respect for the freely expressed will of the people is the most secure safeguard of peace in these parts.' (*Aksa*, no. 32 (1991), p. 1).
- ¹³ 'Intervju kardinala Kuharića tjedniku *Danas*', *Aksa*, no. 32 (1991) p. 2–4; 'Intervju kardinala Kuharića tjedniku *Glas Koncila*', *Aksa*, no. 32 (1991), pp. 5–7.
- ¹⁴ Nikolaj Velimirović, *Sabrana dela* (Düsseldorf-Himmelsthür); Justin Popović, *Svetoslavlje kao filozofija života* (Munich, 1953); Popović, *Na Bogočovečanskom putu* (Belgrade, 1980). See the periodical *Le Messager Orthodoxe*, no. 88 (1981), for a biographical portrait of Dr Justin Popović, who died in 1979.
- ¹⁵ Atanasije Jevtić, *Od Kosova do Jadovna* (Belgrade, 1987); Jevtić, *Velikimučenički Jasenovac* (Valjevo-Belgrade, 1990).
- ¹⁶ Dr Djoko Slijepčević, *Istorija Srpske Pravoslavne Crkve* (vols I and II, Düsseldorf, Munich, 1966–78).
- ¹⁷ *Pravoslavlje*, vol. 25, no. 576 (1991), pp. 1–2.
- ¹⁸ In *Pravoslavlje*, vol. 24, no. 554 (1990), there was published a statement allegedly signed by the World Council of Churches and many member churches in which Islamic fundamentalism in Kosovo was attacked and solidarity with the Christian population in Kosovo was expressed. When I later tried to verify this statement with functionaries of the World Council of Churches they appeared to be completely unaware of it and denied that the World Council of Churches had given its signature to it.
- ¹⁹ Vladimir Dedijer, *Vatikan i Jasenovac* (Belgrade, 1987); Dragoljub Živojinović and Dejan Lučić, *Varvarstvo u ime Hristovo* (Belgrade, 1988); Milan Bulajić, *Ustaški zločini genocida i sudjenje Andriji Artuković 1986* (Belgrade, 1988).
- ²⁰ Relations between Serbian and Croatian scholars have gravely deteriorated. Cooperation between the Serbian and Croatian Academies of Sciences has recently been halted. Meri Stajduhar, 'Ostavke bez odjeka', *Danas*, vol. 10, no. 503 (1991), pp. 50–1; Stajduhar, 'Rat

medju besmrtnicima', *Danas*, vol. 10, no. 504 (1991), pp. 52–3. The differing views of the present situation can be found in statements published by the Academies and sent to universities all over the world. The Serbian view was presented in a statement of 18 August 1991, *Einige grundlegende Tatsachen die Lage des serbischen Volkes in Kroatien betreffend*; the Croatian Academy presented its view in a declaration of 17 September 1991.

- ²¹ The weekly *Danas*, however, recently presented views on the war and on Serb–Croat relations from a number of critical intellectuals from Belgrade: Bogdan Bogdanović, Filip David, Stojan Cerović, Vesna Pešić and Mirko Kovač. *Danas*, vol. 10, no. 506 (1991), pp. 20–21.
- ²² 'Govor kardinala Kuharića u Srijemskim Karlovcima', *Aksa*, no. 19 (1991) p. 11; 'Govor patrijarha Pavle na susretu s kardinalom Kuharićem', *Aksa*, no. 22 (1991), p. 13; 'Izjava za javnost', *Aksa*, no. 19 (1991), p. 13; 'Zajedničko priopćenje sa susreta katoličkih i pravoslavnih biskupa u Slavonskom Brodu, pozdravni govor kardinala Kuharića srpskom patrijarhu, pozdravni govor patrijarha Pavle kardinalu Kuhariću', *Aksa*, no. 30 (1991), pp. 6–9.
- ²³ Tomislav Vuković, *Mozaik Izdaje* (Zagreb, 1991).
- ²⁴ 'Pismo srpskog patrijarha Pavla lordu Carringtonu, poziv srpskog patrijarha na rat i mrznju protiv Hrvata', *Aksa*, no. 32 (1991), pp. 10–11.
- ²⁵ Nikolaj Velimirović, 'Kroz tamnički prozor', *Sabrana dela*, vol. XIII, pp. 181–384. Geert van Dartel and Nikolaj Velimirović, *Widerspruchszeichen in der jugoslawischen Gesellschaft*, unpublished manuscript, 1986.