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THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF THE YUGOSLAV CONFLICTS

If we adopt the premise that religious wars are only those wars that are waged about religious disputes and unresolved issues, then the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s were not religious wars (at least not in a narrow sense), because they were not instigated by religious problems. Thus, they differ from religious wars in the past. For example, the religious wars in the 17th century Europe could not be possible without the Protestant Reformation, which *de facto* represented an act of a *religious* reform and transformation. Furthermore, if we accept that the importance of the religious dimension of a conflict increases in proportion to the extent to which the religious structures within a state coincide with the power structures (the thesis of the German theologian Heintz-Günther Stobbe)¹ then the former SFRY is definitely not a good example of that. Secularization was a predominant process until the late 80s, while an increased religiousness mainly coincides with the transition from one quasi-religious system (ideology of Communism) into another (nationalist ideologies).

Communism and nationalism, as well as religion, are the symbolic systems on which any broader, functional or symbolic definition of religion, could probably be applied. Take, for example, the functional definition of Milton Yinger from 1970:

»Where one finds awareness of and interest in the continuing, recurrent, permanent problems of human existence – the human condition itself, as contrasted with specific problems; where one finds rites and shared beliefs relevant to that awareness, which define the strategy of an ultimate victory; and where one has groups organized to heighten that awareness and to teach and maintain those rites and beliefs – there one has religion«.²

In his approach to religion, Yinger rejects the need to discuss the supernatural as an essential element of religion, while other authors contend that there is no religion without the belief in the supernatural. At any rate, this definition is too wide and may include some forms of quasi-religiosity that, in turn, also represent the systems of belief and activity providing the answers to fundamental questions about the meaning and sense of life. Yinger's main problem is how to precisely distinguish religion from other forms of belief: the faith, indeed, may be religious, as well as non-religious in its character.

¹ See Heintz-Günther Stobbe, «The Religious Implications of the Conflicts in Central and Eastern Europe», in *Steps Towards Reconciliation*, Ecumenical Council of Churches in Hungary, Budapest, 1966, p.108.

² Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion*, New York, Macmillan, 1970, p. 33.

A similar dilemma is implied by the well-known and detailed definition of religion formulated by Clifford Geertz in his work *Interpretation of Cultures*:

»Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [people] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic«.³

I think that the former two examples aptly illustrate the difficulties related to defining religion in theoretical terms. Today, the boundary between the religious and the quasi-religious is very thin. For example, the web site www.adherents.com, often used by religious scholars for obtaining information on the number of religious adherents in the world and other statistical data, regularly mentions Scientology and “religion” *Juche* in North Korea, i.e. a form of »Kimilsungism« which is more of an (atheist) ideology than religion. If beliefs and rituals are the major elements of any religion, one could claim that the quasi-religious systems, such as Communism and nationalism, include those elements as central for both ideologies. On the level of belief and dogma one may clearly recognize the utopian-eschatological patterns that, in fact, represent the religious heritage, especially the one derived from the »Abraham tradition« of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the area of ritual one identifies, at least on the syntax-level, a parallelism between the religious and political rituals, i.e. the initiation rites patterns, the rites of passage or the glorification of a religious, military, political leader in his earthly and posthumous existence. It is certainly not an accident that the military hierarchy of the former socialist Yugoslavia, at least ideologically, relatively easily and painlessly survived the transition from the Communist into the nationalist quasi-religious pattern.

However, despite the similarities between the religious and quasi-religious systems, the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia could hardly be characterized as inter-religious. After all, the religious communities issued various appeals to reconciliation and joint prayer even during the war. In this respect, the Yugoslav case was specific in comparison with other modern wars.⁴ On the other hand, a great number of temples and religious facilities were destroyed in these wars, while priests were also mistreated or killed. Some members of the high clergy even appealed to the continuation of conflicts when it was possible and realistic to make truce, or adopt a peace plan. Viewed from this perspective, at least some religious communities could not be easily amnestied from their responsibility for war.

³ Clifford Geertz, «Religion as a Cultural System», in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. By Michael Banton, London, Tavistock, 1966, p. 4.

⁴ This was aptly pointed out by Thomas Bremer in “Why is the Reconciliation among the Religious Communities in South-Eastern Europe so Complicated?”, *Regional Contact* XII, no. 13, 1998, pp. 30-39.

However, if the religious element were more important in this context, religion should have been singled out, as a significant factor, in the process of stabilization of South Eastern Europe. This would, at least, apply to official documents, such as the Dayton Agreement or Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. Interestingly enough, religion is mentioned only a few times in the Dayton Agreement (in a rather general context) in the Constitution and Annex on Human Rights, whereas in the Stability Pact religion and churches are not mentioned at all.

In order to clarify this dilemma regarding the role of religion in the Yugoslav wars, let us note that the majority of conflicts in the world, in which religion represents a significant factor, are not waged for religious reasons. This is primarily the case with the so-called “identity conflicts”, where religion may serve as an appropriate *differentia specifica* that perhaps more easily articulates much more complex reasons for the conflict, including the warfare. This, I would contend, was the case with the Yugoslav wars in the 90s.

A highly secularized society of the 1960s and 1970s, in which the Communist, atheist ideology left its mark on the political, as well as cultural, national and religious levels, suddenly faced, in the late eighties and early nineties, a massive ethno-mobilization, ghost of nationalism and the politically imposed identification of religion and nation. This society also faced its own semi-literacy regarding religious matters, providing, thus, a secure refuge for an ecclesiastical nationalism and nationalist populism. Therefore, it was possible that in this region, under the conditions of a fratricidal war and long-lasting politicization of religion (first in the communist, and then in the nationalist key), one witnessed a subsequent, secondary “religization” of politics and interethnic conflict. This, of course, has found its expression in the theories concerning religious roots of the Yugoslav conflicts. The war in the former Yugoslavia from 1991-1995 was, however, primarily a result of the political and inter-ethnic conflicts. Religion, however, appeared as a significant element of ethnicity, and this is probably the reason why the war itself, in this context, has been experienced as an inter-religious conflict.

Speaking of the temples destroyed during the war, let us have in mind that this was primarily a *symbolical* act: the temples were not destroyed so much as religious facilities, but as the national and ethnic symbols of a community’s presence on a certain territory. In the perception of some churches, the war was also experienced as *territorial issue*. In such a perception, it gained legitimacy, because it was necessary to defend, as it were (unfortunately, at the cost of war-crimes), one’s presence, one’s physical and spiritual survival on a “fatherland”.

In order to support and illustrate my thesis, let me quote a sufficiently characteristic, sufficiently official and sufficiently general document released by the Serbian Orthodox Church in the summer of 1994. The *Appeal to the Serbian People and World Public* of the Bishop's Conference of the SOC (July 5, 1994) reads as follows:

»With full responsibility before God and our people and history of mankind we invite all Serbian people to take a stand in defending the centuries-long rights and freedoms, its own vital interests necessary for the physical and spiritual survival on its fatherland and grand-fatherland... as the people and the Church, deeply rooted in the martyred country Bosnia-Herzegovina, today we may not accept the Geneva imposed decisions on percentages and maps and, thus, remain without our: Žitomislići on the Neretva, or Synodal Church in Mostar, or Church Sopotnica on the Drina, Monastery Krka, or Krupa in Dalmatia, Ozren and Vozuća in Bosnia, Prebilovci in Hercegovina or Jasenovac in Slavonia«.⁵

In this appeal, the Church, therefore, invites »*all Serbian people* (emph. M.V.) to take a stand in defending the centuries-long rights and freedoms, its own vital interests necessary for the physical and spiritual survival on its fatherland and grand-fatherland «.⁶ This actually meant that all Serbs, both in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and beyond it, should have taken arms in order to avoid the implementation of the Contact Group peace plan. This was, in fact, an open invitation to continue the war that, fortunately, this time did not find response among the Serbs.

Tragically enough, what wasn't clear to the representatives of the SOC in 1994, became clear only after the war, in 1996:

»Notwithstanding the dissolution of the Versailles Yugoslavia, i.e. the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, the jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church still extends to all the Orthodox on that territory«.⁷

In other words, the *ecclesiastical* jurisdiction does not necessarily imply the *state* jurisdiction on a given territory. After all, one of the greatest Serbian sanctuaries, the Hilandar Monastery, is not on the territory of Serbia, but Greece.

In the light of these reflections and examples, it is clear, I think, that a war should not be directly waged about religious issues, in order to acquire, in any of its phases, its religious dimension. It seems that the role of religious aspects of the conflicts in former Yugoslavia should be viewed in such a context. Although the religious structures did not essentially coincide with the political power structures (as was the case, for example, in the aftermath of

⁵ *Glasnik SPC*, October 1994 (in: Milorad Tomanić, *Srpska crkva u ratu i ratovi u njoj*, Beograd, Krug, 2001, p. 123.)

⁶ *Ibid.*, str. 120.

⁷ *Glasnik SPC*, June 1996. *Ibidem*, p. 123.

the Iranian revolution of 1979), in some of its phases, the war indeed acquired religious characteristics. On the one hand, this was manifested by the mistreatment and killing of priests, as well as in the destruction of temples and other religious facilities as the recognizable symbols of presence of an ethnic, national or religious community on a given territory. On the other hand, as we have seen, the religious communities themselves experienced the war as a territorial issue that could have affected the jurisdiction of a religious community, especially in those cases where the territorial organization was inherent to the church organization, as is the case with the Serbian Orthodox Church.

It is, however, in the spirit of Jesus' message that holiness is not to be sought in the desolate *territories*, but rather in the *relationships* between the people who share the same land.