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***Religion and Ethnic Nationalism:
The Making of the “Church of the Croats”***

ABSTRACT

This article examines a tendency in Croatian political Catholicism that originated in the early xx century and dominated Croatia since 1990. Today in the Republic of Croatia it is religious monopoly and national institution under unofficial name “Church of the Croats” (*Crkva u Hrvata* or *CUH*). CUH de facto co-rules the country with the nationalist party Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ) and includes the majority of the Croatian population and ethnic Croats in Croatia and in foreign countries including neighboring ex-Yugoslav countries, in Europe and overseas. The article analyzes the origins and development of the “Church of the Croats”.

KEYWORDS: Croatia—Catholic Church; Croatia-Church-State Relations; Serbian Orthodox Church; Ethnic Nationalism—Croatia; Ethnic Nationalism—Serbia; Nationalism-Pan Slavism; Nationalism—Yugoslavia; Balkanization.

1. Introduction

In the period under consideration (1989-2009), the key feature of Croatian Catholicism is the so-called “Church of the Croats” (*Crkva u Hrvata* or *CUH*). This is an unofficial name of the Catholic Church of the Republic Croatia but it also embraces ethnic Croats outside its borders, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Western Europe in the Americas and Australia. Catholicism is more than Croatia’s majority religion – it is the key feature of nationhood and every ethnic Croat is expected to be a Catholic. In Croatia Catholicism is de facto state religion to which at this writing belongs

approximately between 87-90 per cent of the population.¹ This Church is closely allied with a nationalist party that has ruled Croatia since 1990 (except between 2000-2003) known under the name Croatian Democratic Community (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* or *HDZ*). In further references to this contemporary form of Croatian national Catholicism I will be using the acronym CUH (*Crkva u Hrvata*). “Church of the Croats” is an unofficial label applied to a part of the Roman Catholic Church and today customarily used in public discourse, in clerical public pronouncements and even in liturgical discourse although it does not have any canonical or theological justification. This label has been invented on the wake of World War II by church press, to be revived by Croat émigré circles afterward. It is reintroduced in domestic public discourse during the twilight of titoism in the 1970s and 1980s again by church press which, then, was free enough to espouse and voice whatever content it liked including their most favorite albeit in the multiethnic Yugoslav milieu explosive and poisonous theme, namely an exaggerated ethnic nationalism. By adopting ethnic name as part of Church’s name, Croatian clerical nationalists wished to send message to both Croatian national communists and liberals – that they are better Croats. Also to the Serbian Orthodox Church that they are better religious nationalists embedded into their ethnic community as deeply as any Eastern Orthodox Church can be and that they desire Church-state symbiosis.

Granted, this “Church of the Croats” is a Catholic Church, i.e. a branch of universal Christianity in its Roman Catholic variant. Perhaps a quite perverse type of Catholicism but still Catholicism even though it is difficult – except for the papal authority --- to find many other similarities between CUH and Catholics in, say, France, Brazil, Nicaragua, the USA or the Philippines. It seems more suitable referring to CUH as a “phenomenon”, or “tendency” instead of a “church” or “religion”. In any case, it is a historical phenomenon, a phase or a form that must be observed and interpreted in historical context by identifying and explaining historical changes and transformations. The context in point is the seminal historical changes since the 1980s on a global scale and in particular in Eastern Europe and the part of Southeastern Europe that from World War II to 1991 used to be a nation-state, namely the socialist Yugoslav federation (SFRJ). And because I hold the influence on the emergence of the CUH from

¹ For a detailed analysis of these trends in a global context see Srđan Vrcan, *Vjera u vrtlozima tranzicije*. Split: Glas Dalmacije Revija Dalmatinske Akcije, 2001. A brief review of religiosity trends in transitional Croatia is provided in Vjekoslav Perica, “The Most Catholic Country in Europe? Church, State and Society in Contemporary Croatia.” *Religion, State and Society: The Keston Journal*, Oxford, UK, Vol. 34, No. 4, pp. 311-346, December 2006.

Southeastern Europe or the Balkans to be relatively the strongest among those factors, I would propose that the main cause of the development and design of the “Church of the Croats” is Balkanization.

A basic definition as provided by Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary (2003), reads that “Bal·kan·ize, -ized, -iz·ing“ means „to divide (a country, territory, etc.) into small, quarrelsome, ineffectual states” or “to divide (groups, areas, etc.) into contending and usually ineffectual factions.”² Broadly interpreted, Balkanization signifies changes and transformations from something more general into particular, something large into smaller, i.e. fragmentizing, bifurcating, disintegrating in direction of various “micro” forms of uncertain fate that includes failed ideologies and “failed states” entangled with continuing factional strife. Balkanization can be also defined as an ideology and social process which unfolds through shrinking from larger into narrower ideological visions and fragmentizing larger into smaller states. More specifically, Balkanization is the shrinking of larger states into smaller, and reducing grand ideologies and culturally complex systems to small ethnoconfessional nations.

What does Balkanization involve? It exploits religion as marker of nationhood; it worships ethnos and history and is preoccupied with mythmaking. In Balkanization, national identity is founded primarily on what A. D. Smith calls “sacred sources” (such as myth, memory and religion).³ Balkanization also involves a “worship” of history which, in these religions appears to be more relevant than the doctrine or theology – as Christian evangelical theologians natives of this region have noticed better than other analysts.⁴ For some historians – again, foreign ones are in this respect more perceptive than domestic – the worship of history and substituting history by myth is not merely historical recurrence but cultural trait of the Balkan peoples.⁵ In spite of her western orientation, historic ties with Central Europe and sporadic influence of liberal, secular and progressive tendencies, Croatia, like her neighbors of Byzantine and Ottoman traditions, has developed as one of the “confessional nations” of

² *Random House Webster’s unabridged dictionary 3.0*. New York: Random House Reference, 2003, Entry count 221444.

³ See Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples. Sacred Sources of national Identity*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

⁴ See Paul Mojzes. *Yugoslavian inferno: ethnoreligious warfare in the Balkans*. New York: Continuum, 1994; Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

⁵ See Holm Sundhaussen, *Istorija Srbije: od 19. do 21. veka*. Belgrade: Clio, 2008; Pål Kolstø, ed., *Myths and Boundaries in Southeastern Europe*. London.: C. Hurst & Co, 2005.

the Balkans.⁶ Phenomena such as the “Church of the Croats” or the Serbian Orthodox Church are not primarily religious communities but communities of memory and national institutions. That is to say, in these religions, the faith in the supernatural, i.e. the theological doctrine is secondary and the worship of myth the primary component. In other words, these religious organizations’ crucial mission on earth is selection of certain fragments of the past, consecrating and commemorating them and using this material in the present as building blocs of national identities and legitimizing instrument of current relations of power and class structure in society.

Furthermore, at least during the last three decades, CUH is a Church in conflict with society and with other faiths. From Tito’s death in 1980 to the end of the war of 1991-1995, CUH principal enemies were the former Yugoslav socialism (which relatively quickly declined and collapsed without offering much resistance) and Serbian nationalism (including Serbian Orthodox Church as one of its key components). From the death of Tuđman in 1999 to the present, CUH is in conflict with its own society and with Croatian democracy, perhaps even in conflict with the European Union inasmuch EU has been proclaimed as the chief aim of Croatian democratic transition.

At this present moment, most fragments of ex-Yugoslavia (e.g. Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and the three constituent nations of Bosnia and Herzegovina) are structured as “confessional nations”, i.e. relatively homogenous ethno-confessional nations with state religions. Their “nationhood” is mostly symbolic. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro have hardly any other feature of nationhood except flags, currencies and national anthems. Likewise, Croatia’s nationhood today is manifested in the phenomena such as pompous patriotic rituals, sport and the religion (namely, “Church of the Croats”). This country distinguished for a showy design of its national colors, has recently, amidst global economic recession, virtually gone bankrupt with state institutions inept to cope with crisis and corruption. Nevertheless, Croatian football arenas and stadiums across Europe when Croatian teams visiting, and Marian shrines from Medjugorje to Marija Bistrica, are crowded with noisy and prideful worshippers deluded into a belief that their pathetic nation is the best of all countries of the world. A telling analogy for the present-day Croatia could be found in that which Clifford Geertz called “theatre state”.⁷

⁶ See for example, Emanuel Turczynski. *Konfession und Nation : zur Frühgeschichte d. serb. u. rumän. Nationsbildung*. 1. Aufl. Düsseldorf : Pädagogischer Verlag Schwann, 1976.

⁷ Clifford Geertz. *Negara : the theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali*. Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1980.

However, the fact that these nations are “symbolic” and “ethno-confessional” is ambivalent, i.e. good and bad at the same time. Good because such structures are relatively stable and at least “symbolically articulated” thus promising ending of the fragmentizing and disintegrating processes but bad because such nations carry out democratic transition with serious structural difficulties while also having structural obstacles for integrating into the European Union and responding affirmatively to Europeanization. One of such “confessional nations” of the new Southeastern Europe is Republic of Croatia. Created and designed by the CUH-HDZ movement during the Tuđman regime (1990-1999), this confessional nation was Catholicized showing an increase in the number of publicly declared Catholics from the prewar 64 per cent to postwar nearly 90 per cent. Of course, this did not happen due to a “thirst for religion” or “religious revival” after “godless communism” as the triumphant new ruling elites’ propaganda has it; but through the establishment of Catholicism as state religion and key component of the new power structure and social elite; and also by “cleansing” and “purging” of the “worst” among non-Catholics such as Orthodox Serbs and atheists (either Marxists or people from ethno-confessionally mixed marriages) so that the number of Orthodox Serbs dropped from the pre-war 11% to postwar 4, 4% and the number of atheists from 15% to less than 1%.⁸

As emphasized above, the phenomenon of the “Church of the Croats” is historical and transitory. It arose and developed under certain historical circumstance and will probably “whiter away” – to borrow this Marxist term – when those circumstances change and become no longer so favorable to maintaining phenomena such as CUH. Balkanization, collapse of socialism and the Yugoslav wars created such exceptionally favorable circumstances out of which arises CUH as the key feature of present-day Croatian nationhood. Yet, an advanced democratic transition and particularly Europeanization will likely make those circumstances less favorable for tendencies such as CUH. Granted, in order to understand the last two remarkable decades and the CUH phenomenon as part of it, we cannot escape placing it into a broader and longer historical context of the development and change of the Croatian National Question. We need to focus on the role of Catholicism as a fellow traveler of nationalism before it turned into its vanguard and the presently dominant institutional framework. The model, as proposed earlier, is based on the assumption that Croatia has sought solutions for its National Question first within very broad frameworks such as Christianity, Pan-Slavism and South-Slavism to end up with the “symbolic nationhood” as a small ethno-confessional nation. As we follow this journey through history showing the process of fragmentizing and minimizing, we also need to follow another

⁸ See Vrcan; Perica, cited earlier.

relevant process, which is the construction of ethnicity. For that reason, at any point we need to identify who or what constitute “the Other”, i.e. the antipode or neighboring rival against which Croatian ethno-national identity is “imagined” and constructed and nationhood is to be won. The crucial importance of “the other” has been emphasized by a good number of theorists of ethnicity and ethnic nationalism. Thus, according to Thomas Hylland Eriksen, ethnicity is not a peculiar trait of a group – it must be observed through analyzing relations between two or more groups; ethnicity is continuous highlighting cultural differences among groups that consider themselves different from each other, and finally, ethnicity changes and mutates depending on the situation, i.e. historical and social circumstances.⁹

2. Pan-Slavic Origins

The earliest and broadest framework in which Croats placed themselves in the beginning of the development of the Croatian National Question is European Christianity. This happens during the struggle with Ottoman imperialism – therefore the earliest “Other” for the Croats is the Turk. The Croats, like other European Christian peoples of the East, ascribe to themselves a special honor or historic role exemplified in the phrase that came as a compliment to them from Rome and Vienna, namely *antemurale Cristianitatis*, the bulwark of Christianity, the warriors for the faith and civilization in the first line of the civilizational clash.¹⁰ However, in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries (as the influence of the Reformation slowly but inexorably spread eastward), the unity of these East European Christian peoples in the struggle for survival and emancipation is supported not only by the all-unifying religious faith but also by development of linguistic nationalisms through the use of vernacular while also discovering linguistic similarities and myths of common ethnic origin with other Slavonic peoples. Hence, the earliest Croat thinkers and writers championing Christian unity in the struggle against Ottoman Turks, also voice Pan-Slavic ideas. Most notable among them are all Catholic clerics, namely the Dominicans Vinko Pribojević (around 1500 – 1572) and Juraj Križanić (1617-1683), and the Franciscan Andrija Kačić-Miošić (1704- 1789). In their writings they mention their particular Croat

⁹ According to a Serbian edition of Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Etnicitet i nacionalizam*. Transl. By Aleksandra Bajazetov-Vučen, Beograd, XX vek, 2004, pp. 104.

¹⁰ See Ivo Žanić, “The Symbolic Identity of Croatia in the Triangle *Crossroads-Bulwark-Bridge*”, in Kolstø, ed., *Myths and Boundaries in Southeastern Europe*, pp. 35-77.

ethnic name but also imagine a wider multiethnic Pan-Slavonic or even wider “Ilyrian” unity in various ways. They left several blueprints for the achievement and political framing of the grand ideal of a Slavonic or Ilyrian empire. Križanić’s main quandary is whether Poland or Russia should lead the unification of Slavonic peoples. Originally he idolizes centralized Russia under the robust tsarist authority, yet, after long Siberian exile, he concludes his adventurous life with Polish army during the battle at Vienna in 1683. However, what seems to be the most interesting in the worldviews of both Križanić and the Dalmatian Friar Kačić-Miošić, is their sense of discrimination and scorn toward the Slavs by leading Western European Christian peoples. Apparently, as early as the 17th century, for the Slavs the Turk is no longer the principal and the only “Other” from the East, as the Slavs were being “Orientalized” by the West.¹¹

For the nineteenth-century Croatian nationalists, the principal other is the German. While pan-Slavic and pan-Germanic ideologies shake the Habsburg Monarchy, two clerics are particularly concerned with emancipating of the Croats, namely the Austrian-Croat bishop Josip or Jozef Juraj (Georg) Strossmayer (1815-1905) and the historian Franjo Rački (1828-1894). After he lost hopes in “Austro-Slavism” and got disappointed with the Czechs as one-time his favorite champions of the western current in pan-Slavism, Strossmayer espoused Rački’s new ideology of “Yugo-Slavism”. This approach sought cooperation and possible national unification with Serbia to bring together in one country Croats from Croatia, Dalmatia, Slavonia, Istria and Bosnia-Herzegovina and the neighboring peoples speaking the common language (Serbs, Bosnians, Montenegrins). The two founded Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts in Agram/Zagreb, and in order to draw near the Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church, champion the cult of the Slavonic apostles Cyril and Methodius. Yet, the *Ausgleich* of 1867 and particularly the politics of Budapest at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries change the circumstances profoundly. Now, for the Croats the principal “Other” is no longer the German but the Magyar. Around 1900 came a series of vigorous Croatian responses to Magyarization of Croatia and Budapest policies toward Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Thus begins the new historic turn in the

¹¹ See more about the concept of “orientalism” and works it inspires in the following: Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. New York : Vintage Books, 1979; Larry Wolff. *Inventing Eastern Europe : the map of civilization on the mind of the enlightenment*. Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 1994; *Venice and the Slavs : the discovery of Dalmatia in the Age of Enlightenment*. Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 2001; Maria Todorova. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

development of the Croatian National Question. The state solution abandons any kind of pan-Slavism as the ethnic construction designing an ethnocentric “Croatianess”.

3. *Ethnic Turn and Nationalization*

The First Croatian Catholic Congress held in Agram/Zagreb on 3-5 September 1900 showcases an ethno-confessional concept of nationhood (Croat-Catholic). The aging Strossmayer is in attendance and still widely revered but the star of the moment is the Archbishop of Sarajevo Josip Stadler (1843 - 1918). Stadler comes from Bosnia-Herzegovina and although the principal “Other” for the Croat is still the Magyar, one needs to bear in mind the new “situational preconditions for the construction of ethnicity” (as Eriksen would put it), namely the ethno-confessional map of Bosnia-Herzegovina where the three communities of South-Slavic peoples speaking the common language are divided by religion into Catholic and Orthodox Christians and Muslims. Hence, the Croat-Catholic axiom dominates discourse of this congress. “Croats Catholics! For many years the Croatian people has had to fight for its survival and the advancement of Christianity . . . in this uneven struggle the Croats often lagged behind their enemies and other peoples . . . Croats Catholics! Under the banner with the cross, let us not allow disaster to hit our people!”, Croatian bishops wrote in their invitational letter for this Congress.¹² The Archbishop Stadler is remembered after several fiery speeches. “We must defend every piece of land in our homeland; we must defend our national rights, love and respect our language because it is the will of Jesus Christ and everything we have got from God . . .”¹³ He even called for unification of Bosnia-Herzegovina with Croatia into a new Croatian national state and was later reprimanded for that by the Emperor Franz Jozef. Admittedly, the First Croatian Catholic Congress marked the beginning of the “Croat Catholic Movement” (*Hrvatski katolički pokret*), i.e. political Catholicism, or clericalism

¹² Quoted from Božidar Nagy „*Prvi hrvatski katolički kongres, Zagreb, 3. – 5. rujna 1900*“, retrieved on 24. 09. 2009 at: http://www.ivanmerz.hr/hrvatski_katolicki_pokret/03/index.htm.

For a scholarly historical analysis of this congress and its aftermaths see Mario Strecha „*Mi smo Hrvati i katolici . . .*“, *Prvi hrvatski katolički kongres 1900*. Zagreb: Golden marketing - Tehnička knjiga : FF Pres - Zavod za hrvatsku povijest Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 2008.

¹³ Nagy „*Prvi hrvatski katolički kongres*”.

associated with the Great Croatian nationalist ideology.¹⁴ It stresses ethnicity fused with religion and fatally expands the struggle to the most vulnerable terrain of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

After World War One and founding of the common state of South Slavs, namely the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia), Croatian national emancipation would not advance as expected. It is plagued by tense Serbo-Croat relations in a centralized state governed from the Serbian capital of Belgrade. In the process of the construction of the Croatian nationhood, the principal “Other” has now become the Serb and would preserve that role all the way down to the present. Yet, contrary to the so-called “ancient hatreds” thesis launched in the western media during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s according to which Serbo-Croat rivalry begins with the split between Rome and Constantinople, the Serb becomes the principal “Other” for the Croat, not earlier than the 20th century. However, not all Croat clergy turned anti-Serb and some did not even consider Serbs as rivals but as allies. Thus many Croat Catholics remained followers of the Strossmayer-Rački “Yugoslavism”. Also, during the interwar period, Croat clergy in Istria struggled to preserve national identity against Italian fascism and looked to Serbia and Yugoslavia as allies. The “Serbian obsession” would contaminate Croatian Catholicism especially during the so-called “Concordat crisis” of the late 1930s to escalate during World War II within the so-called “Independent State of Croatia”.

In the Yugoslav state, precisely during this period from 1920 to 1939, begins the critical influence of Serbian Orthodoxy upon Croatian Catholicism leading to the formation of the “Church of the Croats”. In the common state of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes under a relative Serbian hegemony, Serbian Orthodoxy poses as a majority church, guardian of patriotism close to the government. Its official name contains the ethnic label and is unofficially called simply “Serbian Church”. This church perceives Catholicism as some sort of a suspect, intruder or foreign import. Several points of criticism coming from the Serbian Church and addressed to Croatian Catholicism particularly pain Croat clergy. It was said, for example, that Catholic clergy is in the service of a “foreign government” (i.e. the Vatican

¹⁴ See Mario Strecha. *Katoličko hrvatstvo : počeci političkog katolicizma u banskoj Hrvatskoj (1897. - 1904.)*. Zagreb : Barbat, 1997; Mirjana Gross, „Liberalizam i klerikalizam u hrvatskoj povijesti (19. i početak. 20. stoljeća)“, *Naše teme*, 31/1987., no. 6, pp. 852-853; Jure Krišto. *Prešućena povijest : Katolička crkva u hrvatskoj politici: 1850. - 1918*. Zagreb : Hrvatska sveučilišna naklada, 1994; Viktor Novak, *Magnum crimen: pola vijeka klerikalizma u Hrvatskoj*. Zagreb : Nakladni zavod Hrvatske, 1948; Nikola Žutić, *Rimokatolička crkva i hrvatstvo od ilirske ideje do velikohrvatske realizacije: 1453-1941*. Beograd. INIS, 1997.

otherwise not a friendly state to Serbia). Orthodox clergy that considered natural to serve government, describes their Catholic colleagues and disloyal and unpatriotic to the (Serbian) King demanding signing oaths of loyalty. Furthermore, Serbian Church objects that many Catholic leaders were foreigners (indeed many were non-Slavs, not even “Croatian nationalists” such as Strossmayer and Stadler were native Croats but Austrian bishops of ethnically mixed German-Slavic family background). In addition, Serbian Church, which at the time had canonized several dozen native saints (mostly Serbian medieval rulers), asked the Catholics about their own saints of Croatian and Slavonic ethnic descent. The Catholics had to admit to having none such cults at that time. Feeling guilt and frustration, Croatian Catholicism was becoming increasingly eager to prove itself “more ethnic and less Catholic”. The Church now more often commemorates its role in the preservation of Croatian ethnicity and medieval state tradition.

Croatian resistance to Yugoslav integration raises in the wake of the assassination of the Croat political leader Stjepan Radić followed by a royal dictatorship. In 1934, Serbian Church was infuriated as Croatian extremists “Ustasha” assassinated the King so that relations between two churches and peoples further deteriorate. Then, Catholic Church was angered by the “Concordat crisis” when the Serbian Orthodox Church lobbied against a concordat between the royal government and the Holy See. Consequently, in 1939 came a strong “ethno-clericalist turn” in Croatian political Catholicism. The Catholic Church, now often called “Church of the Croats”, responded by a massive mobilization through the jubilee “13 Centuries of Christianity with the Croat People” that started between 1939-1941 and was interrupted by war.¹⁵ The Strossmayer-Rački utopia became history. The ideology of the “Croat Catholic movement” as announced at the First Catholic congress of 1900 was to become Croatian future. The so-called “Independent State of Croatia” (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska – NDH*) founded in April 1941, presented itself as a Catholic state and institutionalized the ethno-confessional nationality. Uses of religion to blend new national ideologies were common practices by pro-Axis regimes in Eastern Europe during this period (e.g. Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania). Likewise, in NDH Croatian Catholicism became the key national marker blended into the new national ideology. The Church was made national institution. The Church was obviously pleased as it were considering it its proper role and place in society. The Church legitimized the regime using all the symbolic, ritual, propaganda and other mechanisms for political legitimating short of a formal diplomatic relations between NDH and the Holy

¹⁵ See more about these developments in Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkan Idols. Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

See (but a papal legate was sent to Zagreb). The “Croat Catholic Movement” was a principal resource for recruiting new state officials. Racist and discriminatory laws were passed shortly upon the state foundation and the Church made no public uproar about it – on the contrary, Church press supported it.

The NDH regime in Zagreb carried out *genocide* in the territory under their authority (it included the present day Croatia except the coastal region and the most of Bosnia-Herzegovina). Primary victims of this genocide that brutally murdered hundreds of thousands of people, were Serbs, Jews and Roma. Croats who sided with the antifascist resistance joined the victims of genocide in Ustasha concentration camps. Serbs, considered the major threat to NDH security became the principal target of genocide. In particular, NDH genocide project included a complete physical destruction and elimination of the Serbian Orthodox Church (later in 1942, a “Croatian Orthodox Church” was established by NDH regime for “Croats of Orthodox faith”). This NDH terror was not the case of “massive war crimes” or “interethnic massacre” but the case of genocide. It was state-sponsored, emulating Nazi practices, planned, based on racist state laws and carried out continuously during the entire war. The destruction of the Croatian and Bosnian Jewry was also part of the Holocaust in which 90% of the pre-war Jewish population was murdered. The reason why lesser percentage of Serbs than Jews perished from the NDH territory is the traditional Serb warrior instinct and experience. Hence, Serbs from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina made up a majority in the ranks of a massive armed resistance either under the communist-led People’s Liberation Movement (Partisans) or the Chetnik Movement (the fact that both these movements committed war crimes does not revise the argument that the NDH regime carried out genocide).

The Catholic Church in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina did not, of course, conceive this genocide or institutionally participate in it. Nevertheless, an increasingly ethnic, Croatized Catholicism was a part of the NDH system and ideology and a human resource for the Ustasha Movement. Thousands of activists of the Croat Catholic movement were also members of the Ustasha Movement and NDH officials including hundreds of priests. The Archbishop of Zagreb Alojzije Stepinac (1899-1960) failed to identify the character and scope of this state-sponsored crime. Stepinac and clergy explicitly, unambiguously and continuously through the four years showed support to the NDH regime. There is no official Church document (pastoral letter, bishop’s decree, bishops’ conference declaration etc.) that condemns and delegitimizes NDH regime. Stepinac never said that he was prepared to die while protesting NDH crimes as he would say later facing the communists. Stepinac’s sporadic quarrels with Pavelić carried out mainly through private channels are not protests against genocide but

disagreement over certain issues and complexities concerning Church-State relations and perhaps foreign policy. The Church was not angry at the Ustasha primarily because of genocide but because of the regime's disrespect of Church's suggestions and demands (e.g. how to properly carry out religious conversions from Orthodoxy to Catholicism or how to prosecute Catholic clergy suspected of collaboration with the Partisans).

Croatian Catholicism survived the harsh communist terror from 1945 to 1953, preserved autonomy, and renewed its resources in the liberal phase of socialism from the 1960s through 1980s. Thanks to the Second Vatican Council and the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Belgrade and Vatican, an awakened and mobilized Croatian political Catholicism went in public through the Great Novena "13 Centuries of Christianity of the Croat People" (1975-1984). This new Catholicism was also a national revival: the newborn Croatian nation was constructed according to the ethno-confessional concept and against Yugoslavia, the Serbs (and Serbian Orthodox Church) as the principal Others (this anti-Serbian orientation would receive another powerful impulse during the 1991-1995 war. Croatia perceived it as Great-Serbian aggression containing elements of revenge and emulating some Ustasha practices from World War II). The Great Novena inaugurated the unofficial name "Church of the Croats". In the meantime, first native saints and the blessed have been acquired from the Vatican. Vatican II helped the revival of Croat ethnoconfessional nationalism in two principal ways. First, it "softened" the communist regime by improving relations at the highest political level while also operating "from below" through interfaith dialogue and dialogue with non-believers. Secondly, the Council identified the worldwide revival of ethnicity as one of the challenges to the Church in modern world. It responded by encouraging emancipation of ethnic communities through greater autonomy for local churches, liturgical reform, evangelization in the vernacular and dynamic missionary work, pastoral work with economic migrants and ethnic diasporas, etc. Yet, Catholic churches worldwide did not exploit ethnic nationalism in the same way and pursuing same goals. For example, in Latin America, liberation theologians saw in ethnicity and "nativization" instruments for attaining socialism and fighting western imperialism and colonialism. By contrast, in Eastern Europe, ethnic nationalism and nativization of local churches became effective weapons used by the Churches and other members of anticommunist front for bringing down socialism and attaining westernization.

Croatian political Catholicism reinvigorated after the Second Vatican Council under a softened socialism, was re-born through the jubilee "13 Centuries of Christianity with the Croat People" held from 1975 to 1984. The label "Church of the Croats" (CUH) was revived as a part of the new discourse

in this “symbolic revolution”.¹⁶ In the same period, after the Church emphasized its “national character” by adopting ethnic name and thus resembling Eastern Orthodox Churches, also began the process of a through “ethnicization” of Croatian Catholicism. Since the 1970s CUH has acquired from the more ethnically sensitive Vatican, first saints and beatified saintly candidates of ethnic Croat background. Nativization of cults, myths, symbols, saints and clergy has since become key features in the development of Croatian Catholicism. The ethnic name as (unofficial) Church’s name seems a rational outcome of this “nativization” process. Furthermore, through new cults, myths, commemorations, saints and martyrs Churches rewrite history. Actually, the Great Novena “13 Centuries of Christianity of the Croat People” was above all the work of historical revisionism and mythmaking paving the way for a nationalist revolution and independent statehood. In many ways, Croatian Catholicism was emulating Serbian Orthodoxy’s peculiar religious-nationalist ideology of “Saint Savism” (*svetosavlje*) including the grand Kosovo mythology of a Martyr-Nation. The eminent Croat theologian Tomislav Janko Šagi Bunić would lament: “I lectured at many seminars for our clergy warning them to stop emulating the Serbs . . . We are Catholics, there must be limits to the use of ethnic nationalism . . . ”¹⁷

The CUH mythmaking focused with particular vigor on World War II and the Church’s role in the Ustasha state. The great Novena inaugurated the cult of Archbishop Cardinal Stepinac who was to become a martyr, victim of communism and as such candidate for beatification. Consequently, this movement’s initial target was the declining communism. Unfortunately, this religious anticommunism was not happening in Poland but in the multiethnic Yugoslavia. And Cardinal Stepinac was not comparable to Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński neither the wartime Croatian Catholics could be analogous to Polish Church in World War II. Stepinac was indeed a victim of communism but he was also at least symbolically (and also in a number of other ways) associated with a pro-Axis regime that also carried out genocide cleansing its state from non-Croats. Consequently, the intended CUH charge at communism turned into a fatal Serbo-Croat conflict particularly when Serb nationalism escalated during the same decade. In 1984, the Serbian Orthodox Church challenged the Croat bishops to visit memorial site of the worst Ustasha concentration camp at Jasenovac on the Sava river. Croat bishops were expected to publicly apologize on behalf of the entire Church and the Croat people and hold together

¹⁶ See *Balkan Idols*, chapter 4.

¹⁷ See Vjekoslav Perica, “Keiner kann Gott der Geschichte sein: der kroatische Katoizismus und die Versöhnungsfrage” (Nobody Can Be the Lord of History: Croatian Catholicism and the Question of Reconciliation). In German translation from Croatian. *Ost-West. Europäische Perspektiven*, Heft 3, pp. 202-210, January 2007.

with Serb bishops an interfaith prayer for the victims of Ustasha genocide. In the meantime, escalated a debate in the mass media and among historians. They struggled over issues such as Croat catholic clericalism, Ustasha genocide, the role of Catholicism in the NDH, the total number and national structure of victims of the Jasenovac death camp, etc. Exaggerations and bias in this debate from the Serbian side provoked a stubborn denial and counter-accusations from the Croatian camp. It has continued through the 1990s down to the present.¹⁸

Concurrently with the repulsing the Serb perspective on the shared history, CUH turned against “the enemy within” to provide a new “politically correct” literature for Croats concerning political Catholicism.¹⁹ At the same time, the advancement of the martyr cult of Cardinal Stepinac encouraged new particular martyrologies as supplements for a grand martyrology of the Croats. These new martyrologies included pro-Ustasha clergy and military chaplains of elite Ustasha combat units executed by the Yugoslav Army.²⁰ Attempts by liberal Catholics and foreign mediators to produce more balanced and unbiased perspectives have generated invaluable publications, which CUH and Croatian public in general ordinarily ignored.²¹

¹⁸ This type of literature includes, on the Croatian side the opus of Franjo Tuđman, and massive apologetic literature about the Cardinal Stepinac and the role of the Catholic Church in WW II, such as, Jure Krišto, *Katolička crkva i Nezavisna Država Hrvatska : 1941. - 1945.* 2 vols. Zagreb : Hrvatski institut za povijest : Dom i svijet, 1998. The Serbian perspective includes, among many other things, a 1989 reprint of Viktor Novak's 1948 *Magnum crimen. Pola vijeka klerikalizma u Hrvatskoj*; Dragoljub R. Živojinović, Dejan V. Lučić, *Varvarstvo u ime Hristovo : prilozi za Magnum Crimen.* Beograd : Nova knjiga, 1988, 2nd expanded edition, 2 vols. Zrenjanin : Ekopres, 2000-2001; Nikola Žutić, *Rimokatolički klerikalizam u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji : 1918-1941 : prilozi za istoriju.* Beograd : Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1992; *Rimokatolička crkva i hrvatstvo od ilirske ideje do velikohrvatske realizacije:1453-1941.* Beograd. INIS, 1997.

¹⁹ Jure Krišto. „Odgovor Mirjani Gross“. *Historijski zbornik*, 49 (1996) ; str. 247-254; Jure Krišto, *Hrvatski katolički pokret : (1903. - 1945.)* Zagreb : Glas Koncila : Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2004.

²⁰ Anto Baković. *Hrvatski martirologij XX. stoljeća.* Zagreb : Martirium Croatiae, 2007.

²¹ Željko Mardešić. „O klerikalizmu i protuklerikalizmu danas“, *Nova prisutnost : časopis za intelektualna i duhovna pitanja*, no. 1 (2003), vol. 1 ; pp. 127-131; Franjo Emanuel Hoško. „Liberalni katolicizam kao sastojnica ideologije ilirizma“, *Croatica Christiana periodica : časopis Instituta za crkvenu povijest Katoličkog bogoslovnog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu*, 15 (1991), 28 ; pp. 43-54; Hans-Georg Fleck, ed. *Liberalizam i katolicizam u Hrvatskoj*, Split, 2. - 4. lipnja 1998. Zagreb : Zaklada Friedrich Naumann, 1998; *Liberalizam i katolicizam u Hrvatskoj (II. dio)*, Zagreb, 5. i 6. ožujka 1999. Zagreb : Zaklada Friedrich-Naumann, 1999.

4. Wars of the 1990s and Aftermaths

The war of 1991-1995 in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina was escalation of the misery unfolding across former Yugoslavia since 1989. Anyhow, this bloody and dark age for most ordinary people, was a historic opportunity for major ethnic religions. They took it and came out of it as national political institutions and members of new wealthy elites. Each new Balkan nation established a new cultural and ideological monopoly epitomized in the “national religion”. The “Church of the Croats” has become a pillar of the new Croatian statehood. Catholicism, as designed during its development between 1990 (when CUH-HDZ movement won the elections); and 1998 (when Stepinac was beatified and some sort of a concordat signed between Zagreb and Vatican) has become one of crucial components of nationhood. Today CUH is also one of the wealthiest real estate owners and a growing capitalist enterprise in an impoverished country that to this day did not reach the GDP that during the 1980s used to have the Socialist Republic of Croatia as part of the Yugoslav federation. The nation’s founding father Franjo Tuđman, succeeded in creating in the middle of the new integrated and reinvigorated Europe a state that was archetypical for Central and South America in the 1950s.

The Church – except for a few dissidents – never seemed ashamed or sincerely troubled for the fact that most ordinary people call the Tuđman-era privatization a “robbery” and usually use attributes “criminal” or “unlawful” in front of the word privatization that the former communist Tuđman has renamed using the Catholic theological concept of transubstantiation (*pretvorba*). The set of treaties between Croatia and the Holy See signed and hastily ratified in 1998 as a “papal visit package” during the beatification of the martyred Cardinal Stepinac who is inaugurated as the greatest inspiration for Croatian schoolchildren, made the “Church of the Croats” the most closely associated with government and most privileged among all European Churches. The Vatican made attempts to offer similar model of treaties to Catholic countries such as Ireland, Poland and Slovakia but their governments refused. Armed with a special law above the Constitution of the young republic that made CUH a (strong) state within (a weak) state, the “Church of the Croats” has been able to do, among other things, the following: win restitution of property nationalized under communism (CUH has got more than all neighboring churches including Slovenia combined); secure for the clergy direct funding from state budget (about 40 million euro annually mainly for salaries of the clergy and catechism teachers); religious instruction in public schools; clergy in attendance of all public ceremonies with four church holidays also made state holidays; crosses, often coupled with papal images posted in most public buildings including

courtrooms, administrative offices, military and police facilities; grandiose and lavish newly constructed church buildings and administrative church offices such as notably the new Military Vicariate and headquarters of the national Bishops' conferences; dictating public schools' curricula a mandatory concern for "Christian values"; ideological brainwashing of the armed forces and police through the powerful institution of the "military vicar" otherwise one of the most overt chauvinists among the bishops; the national bishops' conference meddling in whatever public issue they choose, carried out typically in a threatening and intolerant manner; the bishops detecting various conspiracies against the Church in liberal media and remnants of the old regime allegedly lingering in Croatian society through a "communist mentality"; some clergy using the pulpit for glorification of the Ustasha regime and its fuehrer Pavelić; some clergy allied with militant nationalist Croatian army generals plotting an overthrow of a democratically elected left-center government; some clergy, bishops and the leading Church newspaper attacking the democratically elected president of the Republic, Stjepan Mesić; passing laws prohibiting work on Sunday that caused massive job loss and undermined one of the main national industries such as tourism, etc. Some of the neighboring Slovene Catholics and even Serb Orthodox church leaders in public statements envied Croatian theocracy. Probably the greatest foreign compliment addressed to this Croatia came in a 2004 interview to the Radio Vatican by a highly ranked member of the Spanish branch of Opus Dei, the papal nuncio Francisco Javier Lozano, who described Croatia as "the most Catholic country in Europe." Indeed, it is obvious that since 1990 the Church's support to the nationalist HDZ party-movement has decided elections. Only in the elections of 2000 this "ethno-theocracy" temporarily malfunctioned yet, the Church – recalling Spain of 1936, marched along the generals in the first line of a "counterrevolution". On this occasion and afterward, President Stjepan Mesić has written a number of letters to the pope complaining against CUH meddling in public affairs including frequent inappropriate statements and threats voiced by the bishops; clerical support to the right-wing ideological camp in Croatian politics; attacks on the president personally calling him a traitor, etc...

Under socialism, climbing up the social ladder required party membership -- for that matter little has changed except for the Church that took the role of the Communist party. In order to become a member of the new Croatian elite, one needs to be (pretending as) practicing Catholic. Many HDZ leaders, cabinet members, military and police chiefs, have close relatives in the ranks of the clergy. Parents enroll children to formally optional but actually mandatory classes of Catholic Catechism including collective showing in public schools of Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ" and similar

genre movies. A Croatian bishop publicly stated that the Church considers “normal and necessary” that the president of the Republic is a practicing Catholic. Another bishop in a homily describes atheists as immoral people. The Cardinal of Croatia publicly recommends to the state prosecutor to press criminal charges against an octogenarian communist and World War II veteran who delivered a speech describing Croatian Catholicism as supportive of the Ustasha regime. No wonder that within such a degenerated Church, numerous dissidents arose from ranks of clergy and prominent laymen to become especially vocal and openly critical on Church leaders and government during the Tuđman regime.²² When they realized, several years after Tuđman’s death, that the corrupt system did not change, dissenting Croatian Catholics, except for a handful most persistent, have become disappointed and apathetic rarely speaking and appearing in public. I would single out three essentially friendly critics, who still won’t give up criticism and calls for a profound change in the Church’s character and its social mission, namely the priest-sociologist Ivan Grubišić, the Bosnian Franciscan Marko Oršolić and the ecumenical enthusiast evangelical theologian Peter Kuzmić. Yet, during this period, under the surface of an established Catholicism, from civil society and elsewhere “from below” grew stronger phenomena such as new anticlericalism, radical secularism, atheism and anarchism. Early in 2006, group of citizens in Zagreb founded association for advancement of atheism, secularism and anticlericalism named “Protagora”. According to one of the founders, a “reverse discrimination” occurred in post-socialist Croatia: as once members of the Communist Youth considered religious believers retarded and brainwashed, today the dominant Catholics despise non-Catholics and hate unbelievers.²³

At any rate, it is also fair to mention four moves and deeds of exceptional political and historic significance made by CUH leaders that are usually cited as praiseworthy. During the 1991-95 war, the Archbishop of Zagreb, Cardinal Kuharić and Bosnian bishops Puljić and Komarica criticized the Tuđman regime holding it responsible for the Croat-Muslim war of 1993-1994 and attempting partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina between Serbia and Croatia including a creation of a small Islamic state under a Muslim nationalist party. The next example: in 1995, Kuharić again publicly criticized Tuđman for excessive use of force against Serb civilians during the final offensive of the Croatian Army known as “Operation Storm”. Third, in 1997, the Archbishop of Zagreb Cardinal Bozanić publicly criticized Tuđman for the problematic privatization and its disastrous consequences upon ordinary people. I

²² See more about those dissidents in Perica, “The Most Catholic Country in Europe”? See also liberal Catholics’ internet portal “The Cross of Life” at <http://www.kriz-zivota.com>

²³ *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 26 January 2006.

believe that in all three cases, the motives, clarity, and vocabulary of these criticisms were inappropriate, i.e. reluctant, vague and disproportionate to the gravity of the harm done and that the initiative did not come from CUH but personally from pope John Paul II or governments or several leading western countries (the USA and the EU) through diplomatic channels and papal authority. The fourth move, is Cardinal Bozanić's 2009 semi-official visit to the memorial site of World War II Ustasha concentration camp of Jasenovac. However, none of these moves has changed the character of the "Church of the Croats" or the CUH-HDZ regime. Under this regime Croatia is nearing EU admission. It is only via Europeanization over decades following the admission; CUH may become an anachronism which it essentially is.

SUMMARY

This article argues that the "Church of the Croats" -- CUH is product of "Balkanization". Balkanization is defined as an ideology and social process which unfolds through shrinking from larger into narrower ideological visions and accordingly fragmentizing larger into smaller states. It exploits religion as marker of nationhood; pursues nativization of clergy, worships ethnos and history and is preoccupied with mythmaking and conflict against the antipode, neighboring rival or "Other". Another influential factor on the formation of CUH is the neighboring Serbian Orthodox Church and its religious nationalism that assumed the role of the Other in the common Yugoslav state. Although degenerated, CUH is still a part of universal Catholicism and will be arguably transformed via Europeanization. However, this process is aggravated by a slow democratic transition but also by isolation of most former Yugoslav lands from surrounding EU countries.

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