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CONFERENCES

BORDERS AS A CHALLENGE TO INTERCULTURALISM (Review of the IV International Annual Conference of YSSSR)

In the month of May 1997, the fourth international conference of the Yugoslav Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (YSSSR) was held in Niška Banja Spa. This year's conference, dedicated to Ethnic, Religious and Confessional Relations in the Balkans, was part of the macroproject "Regional cultural co-operation in the Balkans" (14T07) (project leader Prof. Lj. Mitrović), that is, part of the sub-project "Ethnic and confessional relations in the Balkans" (project leader Prof. D. B. Đorđević), funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology, Republic of Serbia, and conducted at the Institute of Sociological Research at the Faculty of Philosophy, which was one of the organisers of this conference.

The conference was greeted by: Prof. V. Ilić, Ph. D., Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš and President of the Program committee of the Conference, B. Stojković, Ph. D., president of the YSSSR, Lj. Mitrović, Ph. D., leader of the project "Regional cultural co-operation in the Balkans", S. Karanović, Secretary of the Federal board for the relation with religious communities, D. Dragojlović, MA, Ministry of religions in the government of the Republic of Serbia and V. Ćirić, Ph. D., vice-chancellor of the University of Niš.

The conference was international in its character, because many participants from abroad (USA, UK, Bulgaria, Macedonia) gave their contribution, besides numerous participants from all over Yugoslavia, who came from all the University centers (Niš, Novi Sad, Podgorica, Priština, Beograd), to discuss the topic from their various specific professional angles (theologists, political scientists, historians, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, lawyers, economists, demographers, geographers...). They were all gathered around the topic which is itself international, since everywhere in the world there exist ethnic, religious and confessional borders.

The project of this conference was based on the idea of establishing such conditions as to make these borders the ones of connection, peaceful co-existence and civilised life. By the realisation of such an idea, the co-operation would be enhanced, and peaceful solutions to conflicts promoted.

The conference was organised through plenary sessions and work in sections, followed by discussions. The three plenary sessions were introductory, covering wider and more general subjects, presented in twelve papers. The fourth plenary session, held on the last day of the Conference, where reports from the Sections were presented, was an introduction to the general debate.

The Sections, formed around six thematic units, included 53 papers. The "paradigms of Balkan conflicts" were discussed from various theoretical and methodological

positions.

The Balkans were described as an area where various influences meet and dash, mix and intersect (East-West, Europe-Asia, Christianity-Islam, Catholic-Orthodox). "The Balkan is the limes, in the original, ancient Greek meaning of the word - it is at the same time a wall, a window and a bridge connecting continents and cultures." (V. Vasić, B. Stojković). Being such, it is constantly subject to conflicts of interests of Europe's and world's leading powers; at the same time, it is an intersection of the interrelated religious civilizations and religious cultures. It is the most complex region in Europe, the bordering zone of big religious systems: the orthodox, the catholic and the Muslim; besides, it is a 'zone of transition', which became especially true by the end of the eighties, when it saw dramatic falls of the "atheist socialism".

In the first plenary session, G. Fotev (Bulgaria) focused on the problems which arise along the path from the attitude towards 'the other' in the meaning of 'the hostile', 'the antagonistic other', to the constitution of 'goodneighbourliness', pointing out that, for historical and geopolitical reasons, there are neighbourhoods of various religious communities in the Balkans. The specific interweaving of cultures in these parts V. Ilić saw as related to the Orthodoxy, which in its mystic tradition condenses a whole collection of traditionary, traditional, but also modern values that make the common spiritual foundation upon which the regional cultural co-operation in the Balkans should be based and developed. Discussing the geostrategic aspects of encounters and conflicts of different religious cultures and civilizations in the Balkans, Lj. Mitrović pointed out that they have both the integrative and disintegrative power. D. Dragojlović discussed the double form and power of religion, in the context of viewing religious beliefs as part of one's identity.

E. Barker (UK) presented a systematic analysis of the problem which arose with the dramatic collapse of atheistic socialism at the end of the 1980s, since the Mother Churches of Eastern and Central Europe faced many problems, once they were allowed to function without State interference. Their problems were especially intensified by the competition from new religious movements or 'cults'.

The second plenary session was mainly concerned with the question of the paradigm of cultural and historical archetypes in the Balkans, related to the religious diversity. N. Bogomilova Todorova (Bulgaria) paid special attention to three dominant archetypes: 1. the archetype of oecumene, 2. the archetype of yoke and liberation and 3. the archetype of powerful and weak state-organization, with the prevailing idea that the inertia of the cultural archetypes could be overcome through their rationalization and by promoting universal values. It was in this diversity that J. Stevens (USA) saw the proper role of religion in the making of the culture, pointing out that the right way leads through religious peace, based on ethics.

The phenomena of confession, religious self-identification and inter-ethnic distance were discussed by V. Vratuša-Žunjić. The very interesting results of her empirical research conducted in former Yugoslavia at the end of the eighties show that social distance between the members of three biggest confessions in the Balkans, that is between the members of respective nationalities, was very strongly expressed two years before the war broke out. The results also show a very important fact - that it was not only religious differences that caused the distance, but also the living conditions of both believers and non-believers.

In the context of Balkan conflicts, rooted deeply in the totalitarian and authoritarian heritage, but also in the powerful irrational components, Z. Bidojević discussed current developments of the conflict within the 'newly created systems', pointing out that the disintegration of the realsocialist party federations and the formation of independent nation-states resulted in an inverted direction of social conflicts, which now lead from the military to the class ones. All the post-realsocialist societies are constantly on the verge of pathologization and barbarization of ethnic conflicts or conflicts based upon religious or para-religious premises.

The third plenary session offered a new standpoint from which the Balkans can be viewed. From an original point of view, that is, the aspect of survival, V. Vasić and B. Stojković defined the Balkan region in terms of 'bio-cultural diversity' as one of the richest regions of the world. However, the modern (post) industrial civilization is global, in expansion, and adverse to all kinds of particularity and all forms of expression of biological and socio-cultural (i.e. ethnic) diversity. This adversity, in the authors' opinion, is the reason why the Balkans, despite this biological and cultural diversity, and despite the 'diffusion and cross-fertilisation of influences' still remain in isolation.

S. Nikolovski-Katin described the current developments in Macedonia, discussing the data about the activities of the small religious communities and groups. Although they are minor, in terms of the number of the believers, religious objects, priests and clergymen, these religious communities are anything but passive. Talking about ethnic changes in Yugoslavia, M. Rašević analysed them in relation to the 'dichotomous reproductive model'. Namely, the women of Albanian Muslim and Gypsy nationality have a markedly higher level of fertility, which consequently leads to changes in the ethnic structure of the population in favour of subpopulations with high fertility rate. It is the different demographic development of various ethnic groups that is seen as a factor of inhibition, especially so if we consider the fact that high-fertility groups are characterized by cultures in which conservative conscience, traditional norms and reluctance to changes are dominant.

Since the papers presented at the conference were indeed numerous, only some of the problems discussed in Sections will be mentioned here. Section One, with the topic Demographic and minority problems in the Balkans, offered statistical and demographic data on the changes in the population structure in this region, caused by spontaneous economical and political processes, rather than by a well-organized demographic policy (M. Božić, Č. Petrović). It also offered data on the ethnic structure of Yugoslav population. According to 1991 population census, Serbs and Montenegrins made two thirds of total population, while the remaining portion consisted of numerous national minorities. The decreasing share of the first group owing to the low birth rate on the one hand, and a highly growing share of some nationalities (Albanians, Muslims and Gypsies) as a result of high birth rate, together with the number of ethnic minorities which is a result of the decomposition of former Yugoslavia, of the civil war and of the creation of ethnonational states, should be taken as a serious warning. (N. Raduški). Moreover, the penetration of the Albanian population into Serbian ethnic territory has long been recognized as a problem, among others by V. Čubrilović, who claimed this was the main threat to the survival of the Serbs as a nation, primarily at Kosovo, where the Serbs have been systematically persecuted (N. Dojčinović).

The Gypsy population was another subject that attracted much attention, due to the

fact that the majority of the members of this rather specific nationality live in the region of the Balkans. Marginalization and collective discrimination they have been experiencing are the main obstacle to their integration into society and to establishing equality in social terms (D. Marković). The gypsy population in Niš and in the surrounding suburban and rural areas makes up the largest ethnic group, as the results of B. Đurović's empirical research show; they have a very low level of self-awareness, while the fact that the members of this ethnic group who live in the urban area declared themselves as Gypsies of the Muslim confession, while those living in rural areas declared themselves to be Serbs of the Orthodox religion speak about their assimilation into the Serbian national and confessional (Orthodox) body.

Although a very complex ethnic and confessional structure of the population is characteristic of Yugoslavia as a whole, it is especially evident in the region of Vojvodina, which underwent certain changes as a consequence of the civil war in former Yugoslavia. Namely, various ethnic minorities moved in, especially in the period of economic and political sanctions against FR Yugoslavia. At the same time, many Serb refugees immigrated from Croatia and Bosnia-Hertzevovina, thus increasing the Serb share in the total population (S. Kicošev). Still, Vojvodina is the region with the highest share of interethnic marriages (M. Petrović), which indicates a high level of ethnic tolerance in this region.

Section Two was dedicated to Orthodoxy in the Balkans. The discussion was initiated by a very inoperative philosophical actualization of the Byzantine heritage, as an attempt of the revival of traditional values (A. Nikitović). Lj. Milosavljević questioned the aim and meaning of the bogumili destruction of the basic values of the Byzantine civilisation.

The undoubtedly important role that Orthodoxy has played in the Balkans is seen as a factor of both integration and disintegration of nations in this region (M. Jevtić). Another question scientifically provocative is the status and role of the national Orthodox Churches by the end of this century, when some of the Balkan states (Serbia in the first place) were 'threatened in the geopolitical, cultural and ecclesiastical sense' (M. Nemanjić). Isyhasm was pointed out as the crucial factor in forming the spiritual and religious shape of the Balkan peoples, being the dominant mystic stream in Orthodox Church (S. Stojanović).

The problem of religious tolerance was analysed through an empirical research (S. Markov, S. Jovović) which investigated the attitudes of young people in confessionally homogenous and in multi-national and multi-confessional areas. Its results show that the conflicts in former Yugoslavia resulted in various manifestations of intolerance, religious too.

Most of the papers in Section Three - Ethnic and religious relations in the Balkans, focused on the phenomenon of identity. In an outstanding rhetoric style, V. Cvetković pointed out that contemporary Serbia, playing the role of Yugoslav Piemont, was a political field where Serbian (ethnic, conservative, orthodox) identity collided with Yugoslav (civil, progressive, atheist) identity. In spite of the unquestionable differences, these identities have common features - they are both exclusive, romantic, Slavophil, Caesarean, both have an illusion of self-sufficiency or a 'separate-independent' historical way, and both of them lack a truly democratic political project that would bring the principles of the national and the civic into harmony.

Serb cultural identity, which was formed through constant struggle and historical

clashes, is inseparable from the Byzantine tradition, the traditional Serb culture based on Orthodoxy and patriarchal consciousness (D. Pantić). Into this context, D. B. Đorđević skilfully interweaves a short sociological story about confessional identification, pointing out the difference between this phenomenon and congenial ones (such as confessional mentality, religiosity, ethnic identification, nationalism, patriotism, etc.) The author attempted to point to complex relations of confessional identification with ethnic and religious relations in the Balkan peoples and ethnic groups. Ž. Sučurlija drew attention to the fact that, since most Yugoslav nations have common ethnic origins, it is necessary to distinguish the 'ethnic' from the 'national', notwithstanding that Yugoslav nations exhibit a high level of identification regarding the religious and the national.

An interesting pattern in the investigation of the influence that national literature has in the forming of national identity was offered by D. Žunić, whose general point was that the epoqe of Romanticism played a crucial role in the constitution of the national identities of the Balkan nations.

Section four focused on Religion, politics and democracy. Two fundamental processes extremely important for the confessional relations in the Balkans were the main topic in this Section. These are the processes of democratisation and revitalization of religion (S. Zečević). The former is a world process, based on the ideals of equality and freedom. The latter is specific to the former socialist countries. The revival of the traditional religion and the liberal political religion, as important elements of the Balkan political culture, did not, however, fulfil the expectations of common people (V. Butigan) The fact that religiosity is 'gaining momentum' was seen as a sign of the growing importance of religion as a factor of social and political cohesion, but also a very dominant determinant of social disintegration, since it can promote democratization, pluralism, universalism, tolerance, but can also cause social disintegration, conflicts, retrograde orientation, authoritarianism etc. J. Vujović-Brdarević examines the condition for the development of a 'civil religion' which would have a cohesive effect in markedly pluriconfessional and multinational environment. The issues such as the role of a democratic state in solving the conflicts in ethnoreligious communities were also discussed in this section (Z. Avramović), as well as the role of particular 'social genotypes' in the process of the transformation of the society. Namely, although all the postsocialist states share a number of common characteristics as a foundation of their transition, the 'algorithm of transition' is still conditioned by specific historical national factors as well (M. Sekulović).

Section five - Religion and culture was centered around another type of discourse; the universal. The central issues included the possibilities of overcoming national, ethnic and religious differences through a re-affirmation of universal values, which could enhance the co-operation between the Balkan communities. (S. Deletić, P. Bubanja). Another important issue discussed in this section was the one of ethnic and religious identity. In the opinion of D. Koković, it is necessary to define this identity as 'an irreplaceable record of the universal over the individual, a unique testimony of the human essence and something peculiar to man', of the 'unique "I" which is responsible to testify for the benefit of the universal'.

Section six focused on Orthodoxy and other religions and cultures in the Balkans. Anachronistic and retrogressive historical processes in the Balkans at the very end of the XX century do not correspond to the integration processes in Europe and in the world. Balkan nations are not ready for these processes, either concerning economy or politics.

In the opinion of M. Stojković, that is just one of the Balkan 'constants' - retrograde and anachronistic processes.

Balkan spirit, although permeated by great civilisations and cultures, religions and life philosophies - Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam, 'takes' other religions and cultures well, too. It is beyond any doubt that Islam has remarkable influence in the Balkans, while in Yugoslavia, especially in its southern parts, the traces of the Osmanly empire are still obvious. An analysis of these traces was preliminary for the research undertaken by V. Nešić, in order to establish the dimensions in which the global notions of Europe and Islam come closest to each other, on the one hand, or are the farthest apart, on the other, in people's concepts, attitudes and prejudices.

Through an analysis of various branches of Protestantism, which are, generally speaking, more easily and widely accepted in the north-west parts of the Balkans (Z. Kuburić), attention is drawn to some of the aspects of Protestantism in Yugoslavia, and to the activities of Protestant communities here, 'Passivity in the social life' and missionary work of Protestant communities may often lead to religious intolerance, especially on the part of traditional religious communities (T. Branković).

Considering the growing importance of the contemporary computer network communications on the one hand, and the fact that the interest in this topic is rather low while the ignorance in the religious matters is rather high, on the other hand, D. Valić-Nedeljković suggested that it might be very useful to join the computer network communications in order to promote scientific research results on religion, which could help establishing religious tolerance on a much wider scale.

Finally, this part of the conference was concluded by the moderators' reports on the work in the six sections, followed by general debate and the conference was proclaimed closed.

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To round up this review, it can be concluded that the topic of the Conference was covered thoroughly and from different angles. The papers offered thorough, systematic and analytic discussion and conclusions that embody some really original and new ideas, all aimed at finding new bands that could bring Balkan peoples closer to one another. Main barriers to ethnic, religious and confessional connections in the Balkans having been established theoretically, an attempt was made to revive the spirit of tolerance, love and respect; universal values (human life, freedom); the spirit of sharing - all these permeated the humane discourse of the Conference. As an alternative to the current 'paranoid' state of affairs concerning ethnic, religious and confessional relations, what the participants of this conference offered was the concept of the 'democratic national state' in which the national and the civic would not be mutually exclusive. These attempts are doubtlessly a noteworthy contribution.

This creative spirit that characterized the work of the conference could also be felt in the accompanying activities, in socializing and entertainment, so that the final conclusion the participants made after the conference was that this kind of professional co-operation should be continued in the future.

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