
THE PROBLEM WITH COURTESY: WOOING THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN LATE SOCIALIST SLOVENIA

J u r e R a m š a k

Introduction¹

“When the Church and the State opened themselves to dialogue, I would have probably decided to join the League of Communists if doing so could have contributed to the common good,” a Catholic priest told a Slovenian regional newspaper towards the end of 1989, as socialism neared its end.² Can such statements be interpreted as a positive response to the invitation to religious and non-religious citizens to participate in society on an equal footing, which was extended by members of the Slovenian socialist authorities in the 1970s and stood open to the end of the 1980s?³

The fact that after 1990 neither priests nor laity ventured such statements is not, in itself, proof of the failure of religious policy from the period of Yugoslav socialism – despite the insistence of leading

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² Izidor Pečovnik, “Če bi pomagal k skupni blaginji in če bi lahko, bi postal komunist,” *Novi tednik NT&RC*, December 28, 1989, 13.

³ Jure Ramšak, “A Close Flirtation with the Revolution: Slovenian Left-Wing Catholics, the Vatican’s Ostpolitik, and a Test of Faith for Socialist Self-Management,” in *Christian Modernity and Marxist Secularism in East Central Europe: Between Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Jure Ramšak, Gašper Mithans and Mateja Režek (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2022).

theologians of the Slovenian Catholic Church on portraying this period in exclusively monochromatic tones since its demise.⁴ A more suitable starting point for discussion would be a hermeneutic re-examination of the problematic aspects of the relationship between the State (the Communist Party/League of Communists) and religious communities (the Catholic Church), some of which were discussed publicly, some privately, and some not at all. These are precisely the areas that led to German historian Klaus Buchenau (focusing mostly on Croatia) to wonder “what went wrong.”⁵

The Slovenian environment – frequently presented to the international public and Vatican representatives as an oasis of coexistence, where religious matter could be managed in a *different* way⁶ – offers a particularly productive case study for analysing the constants, compromises, and long-term impacts of the religious policy implemented under the banner of the League of Communists (LC).⁷

The present article, which is based on public and archival documents of various Slovenian administrative and consultative bodies concerned with religious issues, traces the strategy of late socialist establishment to integrate Christians as equal partners into the project of self-management socialism or at least prevent the obstruction of this project by the majority religious population. But these endeavours were essentially controversial, for rather than applying the self-management principles to the regulation of religious issues, they sought to preserve

⁴ Albin Kralj, *Teologija osvoboditve in slovenski katoličani* (Ljubljana: Nova revija, 2009).

⁵ Klaus Buchenau, “What went wrong? Church–state relations in socialist Yugoslavia,” *Nationalities Papers* 33, no. 4 (2005): 547–567, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905990500354046>.

⁶ Jure Ramšak, “The Crumbling Touchstone of the Vatican’s Ostpolitik: Relations between the Holy See and Yugoslavia, 1970–1989,” *The International History Review* 43, no. 4 (2021), 858–860, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2020.1819859>.

⁷ The most comprehensive scholarly work to date on this topic is Dejan Pacek, *Od konflikta h kompromisu. Oris odnosa med državo in Katoliško cerkvijo v Sloveniji 1966–1991* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino, 2023), while many other relevant insights, from which this article also draws, have been contributed by: Mateja Režek, *Med resničnostjo in iluzijo: slovenska in jugoslovanska politika v desetletju po sporu z Informbirojem (1948–1958)* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2005); Mateja Režek, “Cuius regio eius religio: The relationship of communist authorities with the catholic church in Slovenia and Yugoslavia after 1945,” in *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on the Postwar Period*, ed. Balázs Apor, Péter Apor and E. A. Rees (Washington: New Academia Publishing, 2008); Jure Ramšak, *(Samo)upravljanje intelekta: družbena kritika v poznosocialistični Sloveniji* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2019).

the non-confrontational relationship with the (conservative) hierarchy of the Catholic Church, even though the latter had been officially denied the role of advocate of believers' rights.

This strategy was supported by a series of formal and informal mechanisms that created the impression that the northernmost Yugoslav republic was undergoing opposite processes to those taking place in its immediate neighbour, the socialist republic of Croatia – another majority-Catholic republic, yet one where relations between religious and civil authorities were far more discordant than Slovenia.⁸ Still, the key questions that should have been addressed within the framework of advanced Yugoslav self-management democracy, as the regime defined itself, remained to some degree identified as problematic, but essentially unresolved all through the end of the 1980s.

From the Cabinet to the Field: The Hesitant Renouncement of the Marxist-Leninist Principles of Religious Policy

The position of Catholics, as well as other believers, in socialist self-managed Yugoslavia was paradoxical and unclear from the beginning, and remained so until the very end of the country's existence. The foundations of Yugoslav communist atheism, laid after World War II and based on Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, stressed the importance of inculcating a "scientific worldview" and revealed a key determinant of the system – its incapability to tolerate any authority outside its own framework.⁹ Although granted significantly more freedom than its counterparts in most other communist countries especially from the 1960s onwards, the Yugoslav LC pursued a religious policy that resulted, as some of the leading scholars have shown, in controversial outcomes.¹⁰

⁸ Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, "Le religioni e la dissoluzione della Jugoslavia," in *Dopo la pioggia. Gli stati della ex Jugoslavia e l'Albania*, ed. Antonio D'Alessandri and Armando Pitassio (Lecce: Argo, 2011), 484.

⁹ Radmila Radić, "Politička ideologija kao sekularna religija i njena integrativna funkcija," in *Dijalog povjesničara/istoričara IV*, ed. Hans-Georg Fleck and Igor Graovac (Zagreb: Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, 2001).

¹⁰ Pedro Ramet, "Catholicism and Politics in Socialist Yugoslavia," *Religion in Communist Lands* 10, no. 3 (1982): 272, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637498208431033>; Paul Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR. Before and after the Great Transformation* (Boulder:

As a matter of fact, it would be more accurate to speak of several religious policies, for religious situations varied from one constituent republic to another, particularly after the adoption of the new federal constitution in 1974, which entrusted the relations with religious communities almost exclusively to republican bodies. The communist elites in individual constituent republics implemented each their own distinct policies and, even more so, strategies of everyday relationships with the Catholic Church's hierarchy and clergy, even though the programme of the LC adopted at the congress of 1958, included ideological guidelines on the role of religion in Yugoslavia's socialist society that applied to all republics.¹¹

The different methods of addressing religious issues in individual Yugoslav republics and autonomous provinces in the late 1970s clearly affected the work of the Federal Commission for Relations with Religious Communities, as internal coordination and the adoption of joint decisions became nearly impossible.¹² Such modifications of religious policy were characteristic not only of federal units with diverse religious landscapes (Orthodox, Catholic, Islamic), but also those with largely homogenous religious landscapes, such as Croatia and Slovenia, where Catholics were in the majority. Comparatively, different religious environments in Yugoslavia exhibited varying levels of correlation

East European Monographs, 1992), 339–397; Klaus Buchenau, *Orthodoxie und Katholizismus in Jugoslawien 1945–1991: Ein serbisch-kroatischer Vergleich* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004); Vjekoslav Perica, *Sveti Petar i Sveti Sava: Sakralni simboli kao metafore povijesnih promjena* (Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2009); Mateja Režek, "Searching for a path to dialogue between Christianity and Marxism in early socialist Slovenia," in *Christian Modernity and Marxist Secularism in East Central Europe: Between Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Jure Ramšak, Gašper Mithans and Mateja Režek (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2022).

¹¹ The last Party programme, adopted at the 7th congress of the LCY, stated: "When Yugoslav communists represent their Marxist materialist world view consistently, they are aware that religion, which arises from and is maintained in specific historical conditions of material and spiritual backwardness of people, cannot be overcome through administrative means, but only with the continuous development of socialist social relations, the diffusion of scientific knowledge and the general improvement of human consciousness, through which actual human freedom is progressively pursued and material and spiritual conditions causing various delusions and misconceptions are eradicated." (*Sedmi kongres Zveze komunistov Jugoslavije* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1958), 479–480).

¹² SI AS 1211, b. 156, f. 18/1980-II, Poročilo o uresničevanju programa komisije za leto 1979, January 29, 1980, 5.

between religion and ethno-nationalism, which had a major impact on the policies of republican LCs. This was mostly a consequence of dissimilar historical backgrounds, for in Slovenia the religious factor had been decidedly less crucial in the nation-building process than it had been in Croatia, owing to the ambiguous role of Catholicism during the 20th century.¹³

In the late 1970s, in the years immediately preceding the end of the President Tito's era and for several years after that, one of the biggest issues of the LC religious policy was how to win the loyalty of Catholics. In Slovenia, the idea was to engage them in the socialist self-management process, for which the Communist Party saw a precedent in the participation of wide religious strata in the partisan movement during World War II. Christian socialists' broad engagement in the wartime coalition with the Communists was a result of a deep ideological split within Slovenian political Catholicism at the end of the 1930s and was an exception in the Yugoslav context.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the potential development of the Catholic left into an independent political organization was thwarted already during the war, and its leader, the Slovenian poet and writer Edvard Kocbek, was excluded from the leading establishment after the war.¹⁵

Decades after the war the Party was still afraid that a rival organization of socialist orientation could threaten its monopoly.¹⁶ With the majority of supporters of a resurrection of the prewar clerical model exiled, the regime saw the emergence of such an opposition as quite an unrealistic threat; a matter of greater concern to them was the Christian

¹³ Mitja Velikonja, "Slovenian and Polish Religio-National Mythologies: A Comparative Analysis," *Religion, State & Society* 31, no. 3 (2003): 233–260, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0963749032000107054>; Zdenko Roter, "Odnos med katoliško cerkvijo in državo v osemdesetih letih (1)," *Teorija in praksa* 24 (1987).

¹⁴ Egon Pelikan and Gašper Mithans, "Political Representations and the Confrontation of Marxism and Christianity in Interwar Slovenia: The Christian Socialist Journal *Beseda o sodobnih vprašanjih* as Case Study," in *Christian Modernity and Marxist Secularism in East Central Europe: Between Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Jure Ramšak, Gašper Mithans and Mateja Režek (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2022).

¹⁵ Aleš Gabrič, "Odnos komunistične oblasti do katoliških intelektualcev po letu 1945," *Nekakov zbornik: procesi, teme in dogodki iz 19. in 20. stoletja*, ed. Kornelija Ajlec, Bojan Balkovec and Božo Repe (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2018).

¹⁶ Režek, *Cuius regio eius religio*; Režek, *Searching for a path*.

Socialists, whose independent political organization was completely unacceptable to the Party, although they recognized the inevitability of the socialist system and were favourably disposed towards a partnership with the Communists.¹⁷

In the late socialist period, the task of publicly defending the stances of the LC was delegated to select Marxist philosophers and sociologists of religion. This strategy did not entirely prevent sporadic interventions by political structures from occurring, but it did succeed in elevating the level of debate, which now continued through an exchange of views between young Marxists who encouraged dialogue and had a strong theoretical foundation, and theologians.¹⁸

Slovenian Marxist sociologists and philosophers started to shed light on the complexity of the phenomenon of religion in the socialist self-management society sooner and in a more nuanced manner than their colleagues from the Zagreb-and-Belgrade-based *Praxis* philosophical school, who erased the atheistic vocabulary from their categorical apparatus under the influence of western Marxism, yet found it difficult to avoid doctrinal antireligious views.¹⁹ By the late 1970s, the Slovenians, after having empirically analyzed religiousness and acquainted themselves with progressive Catholic movements in Yugoslavia and abroad (South America, Italy, Germany), openly discussed the prospect of religion surviving within the socialist system and the legitimacy of religious motivation in the consolidation of socialist regime.²⁰

¹⁷ Stane Kavčič and Lev Modic, *Socialistične sile, religija, cerkev* (Ljubljana: Komunist 1968), 76.

¹⁸ Radmila Radić, "The Yugoslav Authorities and the Christian-Marxist Dialogue of the Late Sixties and Early Seventies," in *Christian Modernity and Marxist Secularism in East Central Europe: Between Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. Jure Ramšak, Gašper Mithans and Mateja Režek (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2022).

¹⁹ Mislav Kukoč, "Problem religije u hrvatskoj marksističkoj filozofiji," in *Religija i sloboda: Prilog 'socioreligijskoj karti Hrvatske'*, ed. Ivan Grubišić (Split: Institut za primijenjena društvena istraživanja, 1993), 73.

²⁰ SI AS 1277, b. 21, f. 13, Posvet Republiške konference ZSMS na temo Marksizem in njegov odnos do religije ter vloga subjektivnih sil do religije in cerkve, April 24–25, 1978, 1–3. That did not mean, however, that the leading Slovenian intellectuals of Marxist orientation fully adopted the stances on religion proposed by their western colleagues and European communist parties; cf. Daniela Saresella, *Catholics and Communists in Twentieth-Century Italy: Between Conflict and Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

Sociologists of religion also took it upon themselves to organise field seminars for the members of the Slovenian LC since religious issues were frequently still shrouded in prejudice, poorly understood, and viewed as a deviation from the official Party line.²¹ Following the trajectory of Slovenian Party's understanding of religion from the late 1970s onwards, a gradual departure from it being viewed as a "reactionary phenomenon" can be observed, while the Croatian Party structure continued to see it as such well into the 1980s.²²

This change coincided with the fact that in Slovenia the most important positions in the Slovenian LC were taken over by the postwar generation of young politicians. Having covered the area of religious communities even before becoming President of the LC of Slovenia (1986–1989), Milan Kučan stood out among them, obviously influenced by the dialogue-oriented Slovenian sociologists.²³ Meanwhile, their Croatian colleagues (Branko Bošnjak, Srdjan Vrcan, Esad Ćimić) had a limited influence on the matter as the conservative establishment (Jure Bilić, Jakov Blažević, Milutin Baltić, Dušan Dragosavac, Ranko Pukarić, Zlatko Uzelac) was still firmly in power in this republic.²⁴

By the late 1970s, the most important Slovenian Party bodies privately acknowledged the unprincipled nature of Party politics, the second-class position of believers in society, and, last but not least, the need to abandon the outdated prewar and postwar patterns.²⁵ Yet the logic of power monopoly that the Party derived from its Marxist atheism prevented any substantial change to its programme until the end of the 1980s.

²¹ SI AS 1589/IV, b. 251, f. 757, Drugi del magnetograma 17. seje Predsedstva CK ZKS, October 16, 1975, 37/1; SI AS 1277, b. 21, Protokolirani dopisi 13, Posvet Republiške konference ZSMS na temo Marksizem in njegov odnos do religije ter vloga subjektivnih sil do religije in cerkve, April, 24–25, 1978, 1, 3.

²² Cf. Pedro Ramet, *Cross and Commissar. The Politics of Religion in Eastern Europe and the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 113.

²³ Zdenko Roter, *Padle maske: Od partizanskih sanj do novih dni* (Ljubljana: Sever & Sever, 2013), 326.

²⁴ Cf. Ramet, *Cross and Commissar*, 100–101, 113.

²⁵ SI AS 1589/IV, b. 547, f. 5734, Magnetogram 2. seje Predsedstva CK ZKS za idejno in teoretično delo v Zvezi komunistov, July 18, 1979, 5/3 AV, 5/7 AV.

For believers, what mattered most was not the Party's theoretical commitment to the eventual demise of religion, but rather its practical adherence to the principle that, in the meantime, believers and non-believers should be granted full equality.

Communist Party Commissars, Church Dignitaries, and Their Own Self-Management

At the legal level, almost all European state-socialist regimes defined religion as “a matter of the individual,”²⁶ and the spirit of this definition, along with its related provision prohibiting the “abuse” of religious feelings for political purposes, permeated the Yugoslav legislation and programmatic documents as well. By underlining that the limits of the Church's freedom were set by the Church itself, as the chief Yugoslav ideologue Edvard Kardelj stated,²⁷ this unclear situation left room for interpretation and arbitrary decision-making in accordance with the political atmosphere of the moment.

Customarily, anything outside the Party's political and social hegemony was labelled as clericalism, defined in its broadest sense as “a tendency to organise believers in a particular way in relation to matters of public interest and outside the religious sphere, to propagate Catholic views outside the sphere of faith, to establish the Catholic sociopolitical, cultural and economic doctrine as a possibility of just social order.”²⁸ Those in the Party concerned with religion argued that a manifest, outward expression of religious feelings should be redirected into an internal, existential form of faith. Based on the premise (unavowed in the public discourse) that socialist affiliation and faith were mutually exclusive, they declared that “turning religion into a private

²⁶ Klaus Buchenau, “Socialist secularities: The Diversity of a Universalist Model,” in *Multiple Secularities Beyond the West*, ed. Marian Burchardt, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Matthias Mid-dell (Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 264.

²⁷ Edvard Kardelj, *Smeri razvoja političnega sistema socialističnega samoupravljanja* (Ljubljana: Komunist, 1977), 126.

²⁸ SI AS 1211, b. 55, IV-SZDL, Poskus informacije o stanju odnosov med samoupravno družbo in verskimi skupnostmi, undated, 2.

matter of the individual that has nothing to do with one's socialist orientation and activity, means finding balance between prevention and treatment in the regulation of religious affairs."²⁹ But as the appeals from local Party officials for an exhaustive definition of "admissible" Church activities implied, the implementation of such "prevention" or the ideological-political struggle rested on arbitrary bases.

The question arose whether truly "parallel" political and social activities existed and how to respond when, for examples, priests established clubs where their parishioners could watch television and read religious press, or when they organized assistance for the elderly and for farmers on high-mountain homesteads.³⁰ Obviously, the regime kept a close watch on the preservation of its monopoly in organising all important social activities, thus preventing the Catholic Church from entering the "social vacuum" and "sucking" passive citizens into post-conciliar activities for lay persons.³¹

Another problem was the parish councils, constituted in accordance with the Vatican II's Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, in which certain Party commissars saw a transfer of priestly activities into the secular environment, where their actions could be interpreted as having a broader social background.³² Their objective was therefore to ensure that religious citizens did not organise in the fashion of "self-management", which was only reserved for initiatives guided by the LC or its mass organizations.

Invented to stand as an example of the "democratic" manner of addressing open issues were Coordination Committees for Relations between Self-management Society and Religious Communities, established in 1970, which met under the auspices of the Socialist Alliance of Working People's (SAWP's) republican and municipal conferences.³³ Not constituting the authorities themselves, these committees had no

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

³¹ SI AS 1211, b. 6, f. 50, Nekateri aspekti stanja in delovanja verskih skupnosti v Sloveniji, November 26, 1969, 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 7.

³³ SI AS 1211, b. 6, f. 50, Informacija o formiranju Koordinacijskega odbora za urejanje odnosov med cerkvijo in samoupravno družbo pri RK SZDL, December 22, 1970.

power of direct decision-making; their purpose was to monitor political problems and ensure, through communication with the parties involved, that the individual problems would not escalate into raising fundamental doubt in established Church-State relationships.³⁴ In reality, their sessions, attended by representatives of the authorities as well as clergy and lay believers, addressed mainly everyday matters, such as obtaining permits for construction or renovation of churches,³⁵ while discussions about key parameters of religion policy remained the domain of Party decision-makers.

The main republican body in charge of religious policy implementation was the Commission of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia for Religious Issues (CRI), renamed in 1975 as the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities (CRRC).³⁶ The CRI was established at the very first wartime meeting of the Slovene National Liberation Council in February 1944,³⁷ yet operated in the shadow of the secret services until the 1960s. After the adoption of constitutional amendments in 1971 and the change in jurisdictions, Slovenian communists negotiated all open issues directly with Slovenian ordinaries, at republican level, and no longer in Belgrade at the level of federal bodies, that is, with the Yugoslav Bishops' Conference.³⁸

With the republics facing each their own religious challenges, it had become increasingly difficult to harmonise religious policies at the federal level, with the republican commissions taking a more or less joint stand only on issues related to the Holy See.³⁹ Members of the Slovenian CRI/CRRC were representatives of socio-political organizations and experts in religious issues, but the most important decisions

³⁴ SI AS 1211, b. 6, f. 50, Skrajšano besedilo uvodnih misli Janeza Vipotnika, December 23, 1970.

³⁵ SI AS 1211, b. 55, IV-SZDL, Poskus informacije o stanju odnosov med samoupravno družbo in verskimi skupnostmi, undated, 4.

³⁶ Pacek, *Od konflikta h kompromisu*, 47–54.

³⁷ *Sklepi in odloki. Prvo zasedanje Slovenskega narodnega osvobodilnega sveta* (Ljubljana: Prop. kom. IOOF, 1945), 20.

³⁸ SI AS 1211, b. 6, f. 50, Nekateri aspekti stanja in delovanja verskih skupnosti v Sloveniji, November 26, 1969, 47.

³⁹ SI AS 1211, b. 156, f. 18/1980, Poročilo o uresničevanju programa dela komisije za leto 1979, January 29, 1980, 5.

were still adopted in the so-called micro-coordination sessions of the SAWP Coordination Committee, which met at least once a month and saw participation of five to ten top Party and republican officials. Such a structure was thus a guild with a considerably narrower composition, yet considerably broader powers than the pluralistically composed SAWP Coordination Committee and existed until the second half of the eighties.⁴⁰

Given the unsatisfactory operation of municipal religious commissions, the majority of which were only active in large towns, the republican CRRC functioned as a meeting place of representatives of state and religious authorities, and received up to 400 priests and ecclesiastical dignitaries per year.⁴¹

While the majority approached the CRRC with requests and demands related to material conditions of the Catholic Church operation, some, particularly bishops and auxiliary bishops, the leadership of the Faculty of Theology, and editors of religious press, were sometimes summoned there to defend themselves after so-called “incidents” (such as the publication of critical articles), but more often than not, *before* such “regrettable events” could even happen. Yet even such conversations – if we are to trust the statements terminating the official records – would end in a “courteous,” “cooperative,” or even “friendly” atmosphere.⁴² A practice established over the years of CRRC’s operation that virtually all newly appointed church dignitaries (bishops and auxiliary bishops, heads of religious schools, and monastic orders) asked for an audience themselves, as would also most priests travelling outside the country or returning from longer stays abroad.⁴³

⁴⁰ Božo Repe, *Rdeča Slovenija. Tokovi in obrazi iz obdobja socializma* (Ljubljana: Sophia, 2003), 66.

⁴¹ SI AS 1211, b. 6, f. 50, Nekateri aspekti stanja in delovanja verskih skupnosti v Sloveniji, November 26, 1969, 45.

⁴² SI AS 1211, b. 6, f. 50, Zabeležka o razgovoru z mariborskim škofom dr. Maksimiljanom Držečnikom in njegovim pomožnim škofom dr. Vekoslavom Grmičem, July 21, 1970; SI AS 1211, b. 150, f. 5, Poročilo o razgovoru namestnika predsednika Franca Pristovška z glavnim urednikom Družine dr. Dragom Klemenčičem, September 19, 1980.

⁴³ SI AS 1211, b. 6, f. 50, Nekateri aspekti stanja in delovanja verskih skupnosti v Sloveniji, November 26, 1969, 45.

Also, in contrast to Croatia, where such a practice was introduced only in 1979,⁴⁴ the president of the Slovenian CRRC, who was also the vice-president of the republican Executive Council (that is, the Slovenian government), would invite bishops, heads of monastic orders, principals of religious schools, and the leadership of the Cyril-Methodius Priestly Patriotic Association to New Year's receptions, which always received positive coverage in the religious press.⁴⁵ Occasions for courtesy calls, where even the most delicate issues were not shied away from, included not only official receptions but also personal invitations to dinners, which bishops received on their birthdays,⁴⁶ and the bishops' visits to the Yugoslav Embassy during their *ad limina* visits to the Vatican (though those were gladly avoided by Croatian bishops). Especially close ties were established between Alojzij Šuštar, who replaced Jožef Pogačnik in 1980 as the Ljubljana Archbishop and Metropolitan, and the then-president of CRRC, Boris Frlec.⁴⁷ During the great shifts of the 1980s, they also met in private and "enjoyed completely relaxed conversations."⁴⁸

Personal contacts with ecclesiastical ordinaries were not the only special approach adopted by Slovenian politicians in managing relations with the Church. They also avoided introducing repressive measures against the clergy. As a result of a political initiative, after the end of the 1960s, judicial courts no longer sentenced the clergy to imprisonment, pronouncing, in the worst case, suspended sentences.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Siniša Zrinščak, "Odnos Crkve i države u Hrvatskoj od 1945. do 1990. Godine," in *Religija i sloboda. Prilog 'socioreligijskoj karti Hrvatske'*, ed. Ivan Grubišić (Split: Institut za primijenjena društvena istraživanja, 1993), 120. See also: Pacek, *Od konflikta h kompromisu*, 455–493; Aleš Gabrič, "Odnos slovenske politike prema 'maspoku'," *Casopis za suvremenu povijest* 42 (2010).

⁴⁵ SI AS 1211, b. 6, f. 50, Nekateri aspekti stanja in delovanja verskih skupnosti v Sloveniji, November 26, 1969, 46.

⁴⁶ SI AS 1211, b. 150, f. 5, Zapis o razgovoru z ljubljanskim pomožnim škofom dr. Stanislavom Leničem in kanonikom dr. Lojzetom Šuštarjem, November 7, 1978; Zapis o razgovoru z dr. Francem Dolinarjem, glavnim arhivarjem in bibliotekarjem ljubljanske nadškofije, October 19, 1977.

⁴⁷ Pacek, *Od konflikta h kompromisu*, 222, 232, 237.

⁴⁸ Ljerk Bizilj, *Cerkev v policijskih arhivih* (Ljubljana: self-published, 1991), 38.

⁴⁹ SI AS 1211, b. 6, f. 18–1974, Odnosi z rimskokatoliško cerkvijo v SR Sloveniji, January 24, 1974, 5.

Although the “hostile outbursts” of certain priests and theologians may have merited punishment in accordance with religious legislation, courts refrained from taking repressive measures out of the concern that it would make the censored individuals into martyrs both at home and especially abroad. At the same time, the regime wanted to demonstrate its ability to deal with non-socialist tendencies at the intellectual level.⁵⁰

The Illusion of Convergence

While in Croatia, Catholic ceremonies organized during the nine years of the worship of Virgin Mary (1975–1984) turned into an opportunity for ethnic mobilization,⁵¹ in Slovenia the 1980s were marked by no particular events that could sour the atmosphere between the Catholic Church and the authorities. Both sides found a common language to deal with practical matters, such as construction of new churches, conservation of the religious cultural heritage, priests’ social security, and religious funerals. There were still some open issues, such as the position of Catholic teachers or atheization of children in schools, but the Catholic side became more tolerant and its critical voices were toned down.⁵² Until the end of the 1980s, at the base of the LC’s relation with the Catholic Church was “the depoliticization of religious interest,” so the authorities did not tolerate any parallel activities and demands for religious radio and TV programs, which had been made repeatedly since the end of the 1960s by both Catholic Church representatives and believers themselves.⁵³

⁵⁰ SI AS 1589/IV, b. 557, f. 5897, Seminar o religiji in položaju verskih skupnosti v socialistični samoupravni družbi, February 7, 1980, 33.

⁵¹ Cf. Miroslav Akmadža, *Katolička crkva u komunističkoj Hrvatskoj 1945.-1980.* (Zagreb & Slavonski Brod: Despot Infinitus & Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2013).

⁵² SI AS 1211, b. 156, f. 18/1980-II, Zapisnik 7. seje komisije SR Slovenije za odnose z verskimi skupnostmi, May 6, 1980; SI AS 1211, b. 157, f. 18/1986-II, Poročilo Koordinacijskega odbora za odnose med samoupravno družbo in verskimi skupnostmi, undated.

⁵³ SI AS 1211, b. 157, f. 18/1985-II, Zapisnik 5. seje komisije SR Slovenije za odnose z verskimi skupnostmi, March 5, 1985, 13; SI AS 1211, b. 157, f. 18/1985-II, Nagovor predsednika komisije SR Slovenije za odnose z verskimi skupnostmi dr. Borisa Frleca na novoletnem sprejemu, January 18, 1985.

In the second half of the 1980s, the issue of public religious life centred around the celebration of Christmas.⁵⁴ Yugoslavia was one of the few socialist countries in which Christmas was not a public holiday. Believers kept appealing to the authorities, yet the wind of change did not blow until 1986, when the president of the SAWP republican conference, Jože Smole, wished Merry Christmas to the national TV audience (Archbishop Šuštar had done the same via the national radio a year before). His gesture caused quite a stir throughout Yugoslavia, and was not met with unanimous approval even in Slovenia.⁵⁵ Smole's gesture raised more doubts in other parts of Yugoslavia than in Slovenia since it was not understood as a step towards democratization but as a sign of political manipulation with religion.⁵⁶

In principle, SAWP conferences in other republics did not oppose the act of their Slovenian counterpart, although they did not want to repeat it in their own multireligious environments where such gestures could have sparked off unforeseen reactions. Thus at the end of 1987, the Croatian media only highlighted the theme of New Year's holidays, whereas Slovenian TV and radio channels, as well as cultural institutions, had already enriched their programs with Christmas motifs, albeit laying emphasis on the depiction of folk tradition rather than the denominational aspect of this religious feast.⁵⁷ Christmas was finally declared a public holiday in 1989, but not as "a feast of peace and family" rather as an unspecified work-free day, which was according to the republican decision-makers "the optimum that can be today argued for in the Slovenian and Yugoslav situation".⁵⁸

The end of the 1980s thus saw a shift in the social and political arenas in Slovenia and, consequently, a gradual development of a new understanding of the social role of religion and Church. Again,

⁵⁴ Pacek, *Od konflikta h kompromisu*, 327.

⁵⁵ Stefano Lusa, *Razkroj oblasti: Slovenski komunisti in demokratizacija države* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2012), 158–159.

⁵⁶ The act of the Slovenian SAWP was met with the most negative reactions in Macedonia and Vojvodina (SI AS 1211, b. 20, f. 15/1987-I, Informacija o reagovanju domačih i inostranih sredstava informisanja na božičnu čestitku, January 16, 1987, 3).

⁵⁷ SI AS 1211, b. 157, f. 18/1986-II, Obeleževanje božiča v Sloveniji, undated.

⁵⁸ SI AS 1211, b. 158, Zapisnik o seji sekretariata komisije SRS za odnose z verskimi skupnostmi, June 23, 1989.

that was largely the result of the engagement of conciliatory sociologists of religion, who had regularly attended CRRC sessions for at least a decade. Given the reserved stance of theologians (most notably Anton Stres)⁵⁹ who were increasingly present in public life, sociologist Marko Kerševan argued at the beginning of 1988 that “the Church no longer acts as an organization of power and largely no longer strives for power sharing, but prefers to act as one of the entities of civil society, therefore its operation can no longer be simply classified under clericalism or integralism.”⁶⁰

In line with such perception of the Catholic Church’s public role, at the end of 1988, the year of the culmination of social turmoil, the CRRC estimated that religious communities in Slovenia did not stand out from other social entities regarding their critical stance on the then state of affairs. The CRRC did notice that the Catholic Church wanted to strengthen its social role, yet its prevailing aims were those of stabilization and democratization also espoused by the Party leadership.⁶¹ At

⁵⁹ At that time Anton Stres, since 1985 chairman of the “Justice and Peace” (*Iustitia et Pax*) Council (later Commission) operating under the auspices of the Slovenian Regional Bishops’ Conference, was of the opinion that even if the Catholic Church should not intervene in the political arena, it had the moral right to judge open social questions. He also stood against the Catholic Church partnership with the ruling communist structures and called for the separation of the LC from the state and for the abolition of its monopoly of power (Tone Stres, “Cerkev je tolerirana, ne pa tudi spoštovana,” *Teleks*, May 19, 1988). In that period, such a stance was quite in harmony with the attitude of sociologists and journalists writing for the major Slovenian newspapers, whom however some more conservative communists criticised for their “immense trust in ecclesiastical authors” (Zdenko Roter, “Konec nekega obdobja (odnosov med katoliško cerkvijo in državo v Sloveniji),” *Teorija in praksa* 27 (1990), 272).

⁶⁰ SI AS 1211, b. 158, Verske skupnosti in ustavne spremembe, December 26, 1988, 11. The CRRC thus defended both Anton Stres and Alojzij Šuštar whose opinions Belgrade (superficially) interpreted as proof of Catholic Church political ambitions and its readiness to share power with the LC, while in reality they both wanted to stress that the Catholic Church was part of civil society (SI AS 1211, b. 3, f. ZVK 1988, Komentar k pisanju biltenov Zveznega sekretariata za informacije z dne 16. 6. in 18. 7. 1988).

⁶¹ SI AS 1211, b. 158, Pregled in ocena dogajanja v odnosih z verskimi skupnostmi v letu 1988, undated, 2. One year before, the Slovenian CRRC had sharply rejected the conclusions reached by the federal Commission, which suggested that the Slovenian Catholic Church facilitated politicisation and the rise of the conservative faction. The Slovenian CRRC sent Belgrade well-corroborated analyses showing that the Slovenian Catholic Church did not try to establish contacts with the emerging bourgeois right (SI AS 1211, b. 3, f. ZVK 1987, Mnenje o “Informaciji o pojavama klerikalističnog delovanja i sektaškog odnosa prema vernicima u SFRJ”, April 16, 1987).

the end of the 1980s, this gradualist view, which advocated the preservation of national unity in response to Belgrade's centralist tendencies, served the Church as a well-calculated common denominator with the liberal Communist establishment at the helm of the Slovenian LC and the republic.

The Catholic Church also did not intervene in the process of pluralization of the Slovenian political arena; according to Anton Stres, the Catholic Church was criticized by the opposition forces from the *Nova revija* circle⁶² for not being among the most vocal protagonists of "the Slovenian spring".⁶³ Since the early 1989, when the Slovenian Christian Social Movement developed from the *Revija 2000* circle, the Slovenian Catholic Church leadership had been caught in the dilemma whether to participate in political organization of Catholics or not. But even then, it seemed that the socialist establishment, which still tried to prevent people from organising themselves on a religious basis, and the Catholic Church leadership were of the same page about that, since both the CRRC president Boris Frlec and Archbishop Alojzij Šuštar stood against the establishment of such (para)political associations.⁶⁴

Thus, the movement, which was led by the Slovenian Catholic intellectual Peter Kovačič Peršin and aimed to build on the legacy of prewar Christian socialism and its cooperation in the antifascist coalition, was left with no support, and the Christian Socialists were excluded from the democratization process. Many years later, Peter Kovačič Peršin claimed that even then the ruling structures of the Slovenian Catholic Church witnessed a strong presence of forces tacitly supported by Archbishop Alojzij Šuštar, whose aim was not autonomous political organization of Christians but the resurrection of prewar clericalism.⁶⁵

With his vision defeated, Peter Kovačič Peršin withdrew and made room for Lojze Peterle, who in November 1989 transformed the movement into a party – the Slovenian Christian Democrats, which

⁶² Božo Repe, *Jutri je nov dan. Slovenci in razpad Jugoslavije* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2002).

⁶³ Roter, "Konec nekega obdobja," 267.

⁶⁴ SI AS 1211, b. 158, Zapisnik o seji komisije SRS za odnose z verskimi skupnostmi, April 10, 1989, 2.

⁶⁵ Peter Kovačič Peršin, "Misli, da prevrati niso več mogoči, je naivno," *Delo-Sobotna priloga*, July 2, 2011.

later formed the backbone of the first post-socialist DEMOS government. After that, virtually nothing remained of the legacy of Christian Socialism. A card that the Party establishment had often and readily played to legitimise its policies ever since World War II had turned into a marginal phenomenon in its own Catholic midst.

Conclusion

Towards the end of 1980, the federal and republican Secretariats for Information organized a study trip to Slovenia entitled "Relations between socialist societies and religious communities" for over 30 correspondents of the world's leading media outlets accredited in Belgrade and Vienna. The journalists visited the highest organs of the republican authorities, a Catholic religious school, a monastery, and the seat of the Ljubljana archdiocese, and everywhere they went they were told about a cooperation that the state authorities judged as correct or even positive. The official reports, however, failed to include the answer to a question made by a reporter of the German ARD television network, Friedhelm Brebeck, who asked why it had been necessary to come precisely to Slovenia to discuss this particular topic, and noted that, apparently, everything was clear about the Church-State relationship at the top levels, but less so at the base.⁶⁶

As we have seen in this discussion, Party activists in the field did view the activities of the Catholic Church for greater lay engagement with suspicion, but this was not the only contradictory aspect of the LC's response to the post-conciliar *aggiornamento* of the Catholic Church and the impetus on the part of progressive-oriented groups of theologians and laity. There was some ambiguity even at the very top of the Communist Party, which departed from postwar practices or even concurrent repressive actions in other republics, yet did not follow the recommendations of (Marxist) sociologists of religion to thoroughly revise the still operative and essentially Leninist principles of understanding and "managing" the phenomenon of religion. In this context, their

⁶⁶ DAMSP, 1980, b. 145, d. 466454, Zabeleška o boravku inostranih dopisnika na studijskom putovanju u SR Sloveniji od 3. do 5. decembra 1980. godine, December 10, 1980.

safer bet was cooperative prelates and priests who were not only uncritical of the state authorities but also of their own institution. Under the surface of this apparent atmosphere of cooperation – complementarity even – between state and religious authorities, currents cultivating not only marked anti-socialism but also certain visions of integral Catholicism were strengthening. The latter came to light not long after the Slovenian LC parted from power and the position of Slovenian national leader within the disintegrating Yugoslav federation.

It is clear that in their attitude towards religion and opening their doors to religious members, the communist parties in Western European countries took far greater strides than the Communist Party that invented socialist self-management and generally claimed to have made it the farthest in the democratization and humanization of society.

Considering all contexts of political pragmatism within and outside Yugoslavia, the question is, of course, whether Yugoslav communists would have been able to follow their Italian, French, and Spanish comrades in full – but on the other hand, they showed no particular interest in doing so either. As a consequence, even the decreasing number of priests and laity, like the one mentioned in the beginning of this paper, were left without a key counterargument against the ever-louder voices from their own ranks, stating that Christianity and socialism just cannot coexist.

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