

Irén, Gábrity-Molnár Ph.D.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AMONG VOJVODINA HUNGARIANS

INTRODUCTION

(The calculated results of the research – 2000)

Undoubtedly, religion and the church have a considerable impact on the formation of personality and the formation of a man's identity. At the same time, religious communities and the church itself can affect the formation of community conscious. Taking part in the religious life - as anywhere in the world, also in Yugoslavia - can mean belonging to an ethnic community under the given, specific circumstances. For example, a mere appearance on a religious celebration, does not prove, that the person is a fanatic believer, but it indeed shows, that he is in close relation with the given national community. Lets just think about the habit of wearing folk dresses on religious holidays and besides signing holy songs, folk songs are also heard on such holidays. The priests always bear witness (regardless of their religion) that, they are well versed not only in theology but in national history and fostering tradition as well.

Both national identity, as a criterion referring to an individual, and belonging to a national community, as a socio-psychological phenomenon, are in close relation with religion. In Vojvodina, the Hungarian nation has been living as minority on a multiethnic territory for the last eight decades. Bearing in mind this specific circumstance, references to the past of common language and tradition would not suffice. In safeguarding and forming national identity within a nation, religion must have the effect of a uniting force. As a consequence of the recent Yugoslav civil war, certain nations and peoples, in their worry for the survival of their nation, discovered the importance of national identity again and with it, the importance of belonging to a religion. "The church, defending minorities", mostly in Vojvodina, had the role to preach reconciliation, give spiritual peace to the terrified and disappointed people. But in Yugoslavia there were examples, when the church, here and there, had chauvinist, aggressive and intolerant attitude. Therefore, there is a number of people who is likely to call the civil war a religious one.

There is still an open question: did the church act consciously in Vojvodina as a defender of ethnic communities? In my opinion, considering the social activity of the church, it is not destined to excite, stir up wars (at least, nowadays, the Catholic church is not exclusively known for its war-making methods in opposition to the Islamic religion) but for the resolution of personal problems of individuals with god. Catholicism in Europe exceeds the frames of a nation, as it can include Roman Catholic, Jewish and Greek Orthodox believers as well. Deriving from its social status, the universality of the church does not hamper the actual church of a concrete community, for example of a nation. True enough, the situation is extreme, when the church, putting aside universality, cares only for the interest of a limited ethnic group. Protecting our national community is not a sin, but it should not be made at the price of damaging or oppressing other ethnic groups. As an example for our region, the Romanian and Serb Orthodox churches are mostly cited as factors of fomenting nationalism, naturally, it is not a constant example and does not refer to all of them. I find here the conclusion of Istvan Zalatnay, the pastor of the Reformed Catholic church and also, counsellor (the Office of the Prime Minister, Budapest) convenient:" A church can be connected to an ethnic community insofar as this

function can be tackled on the base of universal Christian values; insofar the community is being protected as a natural community of the men."1

1. The Religiosity of Yugoslav Citizens Expressed in Data

After general censuses, made every ten years, the summarizing yearbook of the official Yugoslav statistic data included the aggregate output on national and religions declaration of the Yugoslav citizens.

Having these data at disposal, analyses and comparisons can be made of the rather colorful picture, as far as religion and nationality in Yugoslavia are concerned. The surveys made in 1921, 1931, 1953 and 1991 can be compared on the base of religiosity of the population. One of the possibilities of observing is to follow the changes during the past 70 years. It can be compared, how people declared themselves in 1921 in view of religiosity and what was the situation in 1991 (though it can never be proved if the interviewed were true believers or the declaration was made on the base of family tradition or else, on nationality).

Table 1 shows the situation between the two world wars, when (the present territory of) Yugoslavia had 5 million inhabitants and 71,18 percent of the population declared themselves as Orthodox by religion, 15 percent were Roman Catholic and 9 percent Muslims. The regional division shows, that at that time, the central part of Serbia was the most homogenous, having almost exclusively Orthodox citizens by religion. While in Vojvodina, even 70 years ago, the religious composition showed a very heterogeneous picture: most of the citizens were Roman Catholic (almost half of them), followed by the Orthodox (less than 40 percent). The third greatest religion was the Evangelists representing 10 percent of the population.

Table 1.

1. The Religious Composition of the Yugoslav Population in 1921

	Yugoslavia	Montenegro	Serbia	Smaller Serbia	Vojvodina	Kosovo and Metohija
Total	5128946	311341	4817605	2856897	1521716	439010
Orthodox	3650558	236265	3414293	2717134	603956	93203
Roman Catholic	786343	19129	767214	721031	15785	
Greek Catholic	16923	38	16885	276	16583	26
Evangelist	163391	73	163318	6093	157158	67
Muslim	489972	55978	427174	95819	1853	329502
Jewish	26925	34	26891	6966	19498	427
Other	927	1	926	91	835	-
Atheist						
Unknown	907	3	904	102	802	

Source: *The Yearbook of the Serbian Statistics Office*, p. 217 (Table no. 9.1)

The most astonishing fact is, that after World War II more and more people declared themselves as atheist - so they were irreligious, while they were devoted to their nationality, or, simply declared themselves as Yugoslavs. In 1953, for example, 13 percent of the population on the territory of current Yugoslavia declared himself as irreligious. As a result of the political and national events, in 1991 only 2 percent of the population declared himself as atheist. The rest of the population returned to the traditional religion of his nation though it did not automatically mean, that they became

true followers of the faith. Politics had divided people according to their religion again. The most recent data at disposal are still those from 1991 and are shown below, on table 2.

Table 2.

2. The Population of the Federative Republic of Yugoslavia According to Nationality and Religion - 1991

Total- approx.	10394052	Total		Religion		
			Muslim	Catholic	Orthodox	Protestant
Total of the census	8733952		468712	533369	6988901	89369
Serbs	6504048		574	1049	6195852	4746
Montenegrins	519766		2616	3179	472761	498
Yugoslav	349784		9755	52023	127843	4903
Kosovo Albanian- approx.	1714768					
Kosov Albanians- interviewed	64912		47063	14715	82	54
Bulgarian	26922		99	1242	23556	96
Bunjevaca	21434		4	19207	122	73
Vlah	17810		3	31	17305	105
Hungarians	344147		160	300978	1584	20303
Muslim	327399		317362	262	244	83
Roma	141927		68103	1785	49161	391
Romanian	42364		48	2603	34898	1112
Croat	111650		331	95867	2106	424

Source: The Yearbook of the Serbian Statistics Office, 1992. p. 220 (9.1.)

According to the data, there were 10.394.024 inhabitants in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, but only 8.733.952 persons took part in the census. Namely, most of the Kosovo Albanians boycotted this census and only a small part, about 20 percent, gave the required data.

I must draw the attention to the fact, the above figures are dating back from a period before the Balkan conflict, so before the recent flee of refugees. At the moment, the situation is slightly different. On one hand, a lot of people left the country because of drafts and hyperinflation (about 40,000 minority Hungarians left Vojvodina) and on the other hand, a great number of refugees from Croatia and the Bosnian Krajina came to our region.

Therefore, there is a strong connection between the religion and the nationality of the citizens. Most of the Serbs and Montenegrins are Orthodox by religion, but those who declare themselves as Yugoslavs and Romas can also be included in this list. The approximate 7 million Orthodox make this religion the most populous. Very probably it is followed by Muslims, though - due to the boycott of the Kosova Albanians, it cannot be proved. The number of Catholics in Yugoslavia is 533.369 whereas 300.978 are Hungarians, 95.867 Croats and 52.023 Yugoslavs by nationality. The latter are, very probably, from mixed marriages. The above aggregate number includes the Catholic Kosovo Albanians and the Bunjevaca as well. The number of Hungarians was 344 149 in 1991. They lived mostly in Vojvodina. There are some illogical facts concerning their

religion (like Hungarian by nationality and Islamic by religion), but it can be concluded, that 87 percent of the Hungarians are Catholic while 6 percent of them are Protestant.

In comparison with the data from 1921, the number of Orthodox believers is decreasing and amounts to 67 percent, very probably due to the higher birth rate of the Muslims. It can be concluded, that the number of non-Muslim citizens is relatively decreasing. Merely 5-6 percent of the citizens are Roman Catholic by religion. On one hand the birth rate of the Hungarians, Croats and Bunyevac is very low while, on the other hand, the impact of assimilative processes is very high.

Concerning the data for Vojvodina, the situation is shown in the table below (Table 3.), 23 percent are Catholic, almost 4 percent are Protestant and a few Islamic. The Hungarians are mostly Roman Catholic (88 %) while 6 percent are Protestant. Also the number of Orthodox Hungarians (in case of mixed marriages) is small, as well as of Islamic Hungarians (almost for the same reasons- only 54).

Table 3.

3. The Population of Vojvodina According to Nationality and Religion in 1991

	Total	Religion			
		Muslim	Catholic	Orthodox	Protestant
Total	2013889	9775	458683	1170694	7825
Serbs	1143723	7	572	1016473	659
Montenegrins	44838		23	33276	5
Yugoslavs	174295	1262	39048	44817	3401
Bunyevac	21434	4	19207	112	73
Hungarians	339491	54	297649	1265	20078
Romas	24366	1601	1424	17216	44
Romanians	38809	17	2550	31687	1073
Ruthenians	17652	10	13106	2376	185
Slovaks	63545	14	4248	796	51709
Croats	74808	24	66021	1003	277

Source: The Yearbook of the Serb Statistic Office 1992, p.222 (9.1.5.)

The Hungarians show a homogenous structure concerning religion. Beyond the fact that currently the number of those declaring themselves as atheist is very few in Yugoslavia, it can be concluded, that religiosity (not necessarily fanatic believing) as well as the development of religious consciousness show increasing tendency. Few decades ago, almost every sociological research in religion concluded, that religious people were the marginalized groups of society. 2

Even in the liberal period of the 60s, the sociologists explained that secularisation in the Vojvodina region had such an extent that even 22 percent of the population was atheist. Of course, these questionnaires had rather severe criteria for defining religious life. If somebody was not a regular church-goer his religiosity was not acknowledged. Naturally, members of the communist party, teachers or headmasters could not even enter the church. It was concluded in 1975 that religiously active life was led only by the elderly people, farmers and the women in the villages of Vojvodina. Strange enough, but the situation considerably changed in the following 20 years! Presently a relatively great number of citizens, intellectuals, even young people, go to church regularly. I would like to unveil the roots, reasons of this phenomenon in my paper.

2. Religiosity and the Church among the Vojvodina Hungarians

Minority nations in their religious life fight not merely for having the masses in their native language but also for other religious and national grievance they suffer. It is typical for such grievances, that they have the affect of solidarity because they affect even those who does not go to church regularly, as in such cases, the abolishment or limiting the activities of a certain religious movement is qualified mostly as a general ethnic affair and has an impact on wider circles than one can imagine. Good examples for this are the events in Temesvar in 1989 and in Komarom in 1990. As a consequence of the recent conflicts in Yugoslavia the former problems and grievances came to the surface again. Lets mention some of the typical problems:

1. The states interferes into the affairs of the church excluding it at the same time from the state politics. Even between the two world wars, the border-modifying ambitions of the Yugoslav Kingdom were directed towards tearing away the dioceses from unity of the motherland. By using the Serb hegemonistic Endeavour, the authority ensured the dominance of the Orthodox Church in this region as well. The dominance of the authority and of the Orthodox interests was proved also by the non-ratification of the concordat made with the Vatican in 1935. Namely, there was a fear of the stabilization of the Catholic Church. But in the early stages of socialism (in the autumn of 1944) the totalitarian Serb authority passed over the bloody retaliations against innocent Hungarians. This opposition to the Catholic Church lasted till the sixties in Yugoslavia, until the contract on forming new dioceses was signed with the Vatican.

2. This wrangling had the purpose of winding up the already existing net of dioceses detached from Hungary while the church property and the money from educational funds was confiscated, religious education was abolished etc. During these hard times, legal self-organizing was almost impossible.

3. Besides expelling a vast number of Hungarian priests from the country, the seminaries were closed, consequently there was a lack of priest, as well as the problem aged and overburdened priests. The Paulinum opened its gates only in 1983. in Subotica, where, within the small seminary the education was organized in Hungarian as well. The Catholic priests could only be educated in Hungarian in Maribor and Subotica Faculties. After World War II the building of the Paulinum was used as a military hospital then confiscated during the nationalization in 1958. Though there were times, when the education in two languages attracted a great number of students (60-70 persons) from the Beckserek and Subotica diocese but later the number of lessons in Hungarian was decreased and stopped in favour of the lessons in Croat. In the 80s the students could again study in Hungarian. Nowadays, besides the headmaster of the seminary, Jozsef Miocs, there is another teacher in Hungarian, and most of the students are also Hungarians by nationality.

4. The usage of the Hungarian in the religious life is laboured, clumsy, ponderous, because in the multi-lingual environment, the liturgy is sometimes served not in one but more (Hungarian, Croat, Slovene) languages. In Bacska the most frequent usage is the combination of Bunyevac and Hungarian languages. It happens, the masses in various languages are interchanged, but it also happens, that during the same mass the priest speaks more languages to the believers. I have met such middle-aged or older believers who are Hungarian by nationality, who could tell their prayers or confess only in Bunyevac: but it also happened that a person with a Croat native language had religious education only in Hungarian. Nowadays the authority is more indulgent to the religious education held once a week. Parents are not terrorized for it, and children are not afraid to confess or tell that they attend religious education. Although it cannot be characterized as a mass phenomenon, it is a fact, that a certain percent of the Hungarian children (mostly

in the lower classes of the elementary school) regularly attend religious education, have holy communion and confirmation.

5. The territory of Vojvodina has been a place of migrations, settling and displacements for centuries. The coexistence of the peoples resulted in mixed marriages. It made the formation of families with homogeneous religions more difficult. In families where the Slav language was dominant, Orthodox religion prevailed (Serb-Hungarian and Montenegro-Hungarian marriages). As a result of the socialist regime and ideology, the religious indifference, - what more, atheism,- appeared in these marriages, as parents did not know how to christen their children. In northern Bacska, the children born in Croat-Hungarian marriages were Catholic. A special space should be devoted to the population of Vojvodina, especially to the issue of the assimilation of national minorities, the low birth rate, the emigration of young people during the last few decades. These facts make the homogenization of the Hungarians living in blocks more difficult while the Hungarians in dispersion, concerning religion, could have only the minimum form of national identification.

2.3. The religious Life of Young People during the Transitions and in the 90s

By overshadowing it, totalitarianism in Eastern Europe resulted in standstill of the religious life. Yugoslavia insisted on the religious indifference, while in the new, Titoic state three world religions wanted to dominate. One of the features of national identity is religion, because this territory has always been the place of opposing the Islam, Orthodox and Catholic interests. One condition of the national tolerance is that by surpassing religious discrepancies and active religious life, the historical discrepancies are passed over as well. Consequently, religious education was abolished, and the career of an adult was immediately over when he was seen in church as this would question his ideological commitment. A whole generation had been left out of active religious life and spirit. Only the elder members of the families were consistent in regular church going. The policy opposing religious life begun to weaken in the 60s. At that time, national minorities could nominate bishops of dioceses. Churches became again, though not quite satisfactorily, the shelters of national minorities. At that time, the widening of the previous educational system in Hungarian in Vojvodina started as well. Church played the most important role in the Disperse. If the children could not go to Hungarian schools they could, at least, go to Hungarian parishes.

Curiously, the renewal of religious life in the 90s has its sociological proof. I will start the sociological analysis of this phenomenon by surveying the characteristics of young people as a specific group of society. Namely, young people have typical socio-psychological features. For example:

- the sphere of interest of a young man is very wide what else, very intensive;
- a young man endeavors to build his personality freely by using alternatives, i.e. various possibilities, therefore no patterns not even institutional limits are endured by him;

- the desire to create is very early connected with the process of formation of the personality; in the years of gaining independence and self-acknowledgement, the young man gains self-confidence in a certain area of social communication;

- during transition periods, the political idols of young people vanish and it is connected with the setting of new criteria and quest for new idols;

- the generation of young people is not a homogenous group, as naturally, there are social, intellectual and political differences among them, but young people consider this

divergence and the social reference of variance very natural and normal; most of them make no efforts towards equality and mediocrity;

- Young people, not having much to lose as they just draft the limits of their possibilities (no job, property, family, social prestige etc. that can be risked), have a great ability to take upon risks;

- very often young people, due to their subjectivism, sensitivity and ambition lose their real, actual power of judgment; so they wish more than they can, even the expectations towards themselves are well beyond their abilities.... but, they have the moral right for it, as future is ahead of them;

- Finally, one of the important features of young people is, that they can always be critical, sometimes with an overdose of pessimism or optimism, but always guided by their desires.

The above listed features have an effect of the young people's turn to religion. Young people try to find their place in the society, Endeavour in forming their view on the world. Some of them are apt to education, guidance, other critically opposes, but all of them build the system of values that will dominate their generation. Today, young people live in a controversy, dynamic age, in the era of transition. In forming their moral standards, some of them try to find their place in the family, while others outside the family. When, during the Yugoslav conflict, the value levels (though, false) dominating the society for decades abruptly disappeared, most of the young people (as well as, the great part of older generation) find themselves in a vacuum, as a consequence of losing the ideology and view of the worlds on one hand, and of lacking the social security that existed before, on the other, and also, because of the enormous insecurity, economic crisis and threat of war. The destruction of the values forces the people to escape from the insecure publicity (though political pluralism creates new possibilities) and they turn towards smaller groups: family, a narrow circle of friends, as finding people who think in the same or similar way is essential. So we arrived to the conclusion, that young people discover the strength of religion and belief in creating community and the feeling of security. When an unstable person tries to find something to grasp at, strives to find his own insecurity in others sharing the common problems. It leads to the collective fear of individuals belonging to the same nation, to their feeling of being endangered. The individual might have searched the way out of such situation in the common exercise of the national identity. The roots of social difficulties are not searched anymore in economic and social factors, but the national dissimilarity, differences in religion. According to the nationalist attitude, the roots of evil are not in one's own nation but in the fact that another nation turned against him. This gives a free way to temper, aggressive attitudes and being excluded seems to be more convenient than co-operation. In my opinion, the resolution of social crisis is not in finding the points of clash, but in finding the possibilities of a dialogue. If we can talk about the differences, for example about the differences in religions, we can get acquainted, so we can accept each other more quickly. A religion cannot close to such extent in a multi-national environment, that it stops the possibility of communication with another nation or religion. very often, young people get to such an emotional level, that they can easily accept the difference without giving up themselves. Naturally, there is the threatening danger of forcing the formed views, religion by the elderly, what else, in extreme cases, the less mature part of young people is led by nationalist instigation.

In the middle of the war and nationalist chaos, the Vojvodina Hungarians, as the other nations, quested their security in the community, so in the national and religious communion. But this phenomenon has a blemish, namely the majority nation always

seems to be stronger, therefore the minority, feeling itself in danger left the country risking national identity in favour of survival. According to some unofficial data, several thousand young man, alone or with their spouses and babies left the country in the 90s. Their number was especially high among the Disperse Hungarians: most of them were outstanding experts, creative, religious people.

In order to reveal the fact, if religion is more popular among young people since the recent war, we made a survey in Vojvodina. (The text of the survey is enclosed to this paper). This survey was complemented with the declarations made by priests and young people. The questionnaire was anonymous including mostly high school students and pupils from northern Bacška. The Medical High School and the School of Economy seems to be representative in the survey of the opinion of young intellectuals. Among the interviewed there were relatively few workers, more precisely, most of them were unemployed, as they were difficult to find. Mostly girls and women were willing to answer questions referring to religiosity. In my opinion, this is a typical phenomenon, namely in Vojvodina active religious life is most common among women while men have a rather non-committal attitude. Most of the interviewed were not married.

The answers of young people Catholic by religion to specific questions are as follows: 80 percent of the interviewed declared his/her religion and did not declare himself/herself as atheist. But their answers to further questions reveal, that religiosity does not mean going to church regularly, but rather belonging to a nation, devotion to a community. Most of them were taken by their grandparents to church for the first time. This is quite reasonable, as their parents were afraid to go to church because of their job, career. Most of the young people (65%) are christened, but only half of them were on holycommunion even less on confirmation. But marriage in church, curiously, appears as a new demand, and it can be concluded, that in certain family circles it is mostly a matter of fashion than of religiosity. Most of the interviewed (92%) celebrates Easter and Christmas within the family, but birthdays are celebrated more regularly than name days. The answers to the question about the prayers the interviewed know are rather disappointing. Less than 10 percent of them, does not even know without mistake the most well-known prayers. At the same time, it can be concluded, that those young people who are religiously educated say their prayers in their mother language (mostly in the churches). Concerning curses, the ratio varies, as most of the interviewed know the cursing in Slav languages as well. As to the importance of the religiosity of their future spouse, still, about half of the interviewed young people does not think it is important. In my opinion, the reason for it, is the recent war for young people are afraid to make a family with a person having other nationality or religion. In other European countries this questions might not have such a great importance at marriages. In the final questions, 95 percent of the interviewed considered the belonging to somebody important. Religious people and those who had religious education emphasized the importance of belonging to a nation and religion respectively, while most of them still give priority to their fellow workers. On the base of the answers of the young people, most of them try to find their national identity in the family and among friends. National identification with the state is impossible among Hungarians. It seems, they consider it almost absurd.

Using the method of interviewing (free question-answer form) at the survey, we had the opportunity to ask other questions as well. It can be concluded, that young people indeed have the interest to religious topics. The reason, is either the philosophical view of the world, or family tradition, or the lack of places where they can go out (there is lack of secure and cheap places for going out). But despite of this fact, most of the young people consider the clerical people old fashioned, vain and they would like, if the church would

more open, without traditions and would organize a dynamic social life. Finally, I must conclude, that among young people the religious mind is still confused, obscure what else, contradictory.

Notes:

1. Istvan Zalatnay; "Etnikai közösség: Kihívás és felad az egyház számára régiókban", published in the Régió Kisebbségtudományi Szemle, 1992, Vol. 3, p.11

2. See the study of Sergei Flere in the Sociologija Review:" Dekompozicija religiozne svesti kao oblik procesa ateizacije" Časopis Jugoslovenskog udruženja za sociologiju, Belgrade, 1977, vol. 4, pp.597-620