

ZDENKO ROTER AS A DIALOGUE PARTNER

During the summer of 1969 I was teaching two courses, "Religion in Eastern Europe" and "Christian-Marxist Dialogue" for a consortium of American Methodist universities in Graz, Austria. Part of the seven-week program was a ten day field trip to Yugoslavia and Hungary. At the time I had already been living in the U.S.A. for twelve years and did not know much as to who the prominent scholars were whom I might contact in order for them to deliver some lectures to my students during this field trip. I had contracted "Generalturist" from Zagreb to arrange the trip and drive us to Zagreb, Pécs, Sarajevo, and Split. The manager of "Generalturist" offered to arrange a lecture on the emerging Christian-Marxist dialogue. Prof. Zdenko Roter was his choice, who had driven for this occasion to Zagreb from Ljubljana. I had never heard of Professor Roter prior to this meeting. Since he did not speak English I translated for him from Serbo-Croatian. My preconceptions of what a professor teaching in the socialist system would say made me expect a one-sided lecture with praise for the official system coupled with negative views of religion.

As he spoke thoughtfully analyzing the challenges of the relationship between church and state in Yugoslavia and probing possibilities for a more positive appraisal of the role of religion I realized then and there that this was not an *agit-prop* speech but a genuine exploration going well beyond the borders of the official Marxist position on religion as "the opiate of the people." Almost instantly we developed a rapport which gradually grew into a friendship that lasts to this day. He gave me the copy of his lecture written in his meticulously tidy miniature handwriting, which later became a part of one of his several articles that I translated into English and published in *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* (later renamed *Religion in Eastern Europe*).

The following year and for most of the summers during the next decade he lectured to my students as we added Ljubljana to our itinerary. Our relationship became so good that when I had the opportunity to lead a seven-week faculty seminar to Yugoslavia and the neighboring countries I selected Ljubljana for the starting point where we spent three weeks with a program based mostly on Zdenko's (by this time we had become *per tu*) recommendation of the numerous faculty and other speakers not only in Ljubljana but also in some of the other cities. In the meantime I had developed also my

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own network of contacts among clergy of all faiths as well as the humanistic Marxists (sometimes they were called *Praxis* philosophers and sociologists, although not all, including himself, of them belonged to that group of critical and dissident intellectuals). In the meantime I had travelled widely through Eastern Europe (all except Albania) and met a very large number of both Marxist and Christian thinkers. Nowhere else was there such creative, energetic and perceptive social criticism as among the Yugoslav Marxists sociologists and philosophers and a small group of Catholic theologians from Zagreb and Split.

Zdenko Roter mentored me in a much deeper and profound understanding on what was going on in Yugoslavia, things one would not catch by just following the news and books. He introduced me to some of his colleagues, like Marko Kerševan and Niko Toš, and assistant Marjan Smrke. He arranged for me to meet with Ljubljana's archbishop, Alojzije Šuštar, and some Catholic theologians, such as Janez Juhant and Drago Ocvirk. He was also the conduit to befriending other sociologists of religion, such as Esad Ćimić, Srdjan Vrcan, and others too numerous to mention. It was an exciting scene and somewhat dangerous for those who pushed the official unwritten limits of social criticism. After years of only negative official assessments of the Catholic Church, Roter wrote a book giving also positive assessment of the developments within the Catholic Church, especially the Second Vatican Council. At the time he was the editor of *Teorija in praksa* and took bold editorial decisions which were costly for his career advancement. But, from what I could see, he was not doing this in a demonstrative, confrontational "dissident" style, but quietly, persistently, and confidently. After all, he had the *bona fides* of a person who as a very young teenager joined the Partizan resistance movement against the Nazis during World War II and subsequently became a political commissar. He told me of the turmoil he caused when he was invited to speak to a meeting of Yugoslav Army officers in which he promoted dialogue and a more positive valuation of religion and did not get an exactly enthusiastic welcome. But even they found it difficult to dismiss someone with Roter's record of standing with his people for progressive causes.

In addition to having become professional colleagues, we became social friends. I had been invited to his home in Kidričeva 6 (the street "had to be" renamed after the collapse of Yugoslav socialism, not only for some meals (I remember his dear wife Zofija urging me on to eat more of "*tak fina župica*" [such good soup], which I wolfed down even without encouragement) but also stayed several nights as their guest. One summer when I travelled with my wife by car through Yugoslavia we stopped at their summer cottage located in an apple orchard in Metlika, a hideaway in the country from the busy city life, which both of them greatly cherished.

Many years later he visited the United States where his two sons and additional family lived in Ohio and Texas. He stayed with us in our home in West Chester, Pennsylvania for a while. It was a relatively warm month of January and we sat for hours upon hours in conversation about this, that, and everything. He didn't like to be cooped up for too long indoors, but saw two apple trees in our yard that had never been pruned. The next thing I knew, Zdenko was on the ladder for hours masterfully cutting the branches and imposing a shape on trees that had never been worked on. Next summer was the only time when we had lots of apples on those trees. He had brought Metlika, Slovenia, to West Chester, Pennsylvania!

He lectured in my classes at Rosemont College and spoke to an adult Sunday School class at our local United Methodist Church. Our conversations/dialogues were unforced, spontaneous, mutually respectful. I admired him as a colleague who has met many challenges in life and evolved from what may have been a more doctrinaire position into a flexible and dynamic humanism, quite compatible with my theistic humanism.

This was in the waning years of Yugoslavia's existence. He had written articles for the periodical which I had founded and edited, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, entitled "Modern Society and Religious Liberties: Contribution to the Christian-Marxist Dialogue" and "Yugoslavia at the Crossroads: A Sociological Analysis"¹ and "The Position of Believers as Second-Class Citizens in Socialist Countries: The Case of Yugoslavia"² which I translated for him. I was at the time in the process of writing *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR*. Changes were happening so fast as communism was collapsing in Eastern Europe that I had to add a subtitle to the book, *Before and After the Great Transformation*. Zdenko helped me see more clearly the four major types of the position of religious communities *vis-a-vis* the state and I acknowledged his help in the text³.

During the decades of the 1970s to 1990s I travelled widely in all but one socialist country of Eastern Europe and met many of the prominent Marxist and Christian intellectuals.⁴ Only a few other countries beside Yugoslavia produced truly creative intellectual fermentation. The one that directly affected the course of history was Czechoslovakia. Thinkers like the Marxist Milan Machovec, Vit slav Gardavský, Jaroslav Krejčí, Milan Pruha, Erika Kadlecová, Robert Kalivoda and others, and on the Christian side Joseph Hromádka, Jan Milič Lochman, Milan Opočensky, Peter Haban and others

¹ Both in Vol. VIII, No. 2 (May 1988), pp. 1-10 and 11-24 respectively. The periodical was later renamed *Religion in Eastern Europe*.

² Vol. IX, No. 3 (June 1989), pp. 1-17.

³ (Boulder, CO: *Eastern European Monographs*, 1992), p. 7ff.

⁴ For a very detailed analysis of the Marxist-Christian encounter see my *Christian-Marxist Dialogue in Eastern Europe* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981).

caused such social fermentation that it evolved into the “Prague Spring” of 1968 which then lead to the subsequent Soviet invasion.

Poland produced Adam Schaf, Lezsek Kolakowski, Tadeusz Jaroszewski, Adam Michnik, and Janus Kucziński, and the Catholics Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and Stanislaw Kowalczyk, and Janusz Zablocki but it was carried on without drawing attention to itself outside of Poland until the election of Karol Cardinal Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II. Hungary also produced the Marxist József Lukács and Gyögy Aczél and Tamás Földesi who engaged the Catholic bishop József Cserháti but in Hungary the dynamics of engagement took place mostly along church-state confrontation and/or cooperation. The Yugoslav intellectual fermentation owed less to influences from other Eastern European countries as it did from contacts with the West and their own autochthonous interactions. Typical for a pluralistic country there were a number of cities where creative wrestling favoring social change took place: Belgrade, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Split, and Zagreb, mostly in conjunction with the universities and theological schools, produced re-interpretations of classical dialectical Marxism-Leninism with humanistic Marxist reinterpretations. People like Milovan Djilas, Mihajlo Marković, Gajo Petrović, Svetozar Stojanović, Esad imić, Rudolf Supek, Branko Bašnjak, Srdjan Vrcan, Zdenko Roter, Marko Kerševan, Ivan Cvitković, Štefica Bahtijarević, Žarko Puhovski, evoked responses mostly by post-Vatican II Catholic intellectuals such as Archbishop Frane Franić, Bishop Vekoslav Grmič, Vjekoslav Bajsić, Josip Turčinović, Tomislav Šagi-Bunić, Jakov Jukić, Drago Šimundža, Tomo Vereš, and many others. They collectively produced profound social criticisms that elicited strong public acceptance and moved Yugoslav society in the direction of reform, decentralization, and even a measure of democratization (as much as Tito and the system allowed). There was a potential that Yugoslavia may gradually and peacefully transition into a Scandinavian-like social democracy. But instead, with the decline of Titoist socialism, the pluralist diversity of Yugoslavia devolved into extreme nationalism and power-struggles for succession which, in the 1990s, lead to wars and the disintegration of Yugoslavia.⁵

During my visits to Yugoslavia in the late 1980s it was obvious that some great changes were on the way but I, like so many others, did not anticipate the disintegration of Yugoslavia but rather a rapid adaptation and integration into democratic Europe. Zdenko was writing to me about the new leader in Slovenia, Milan Kučan, telling me that he came from a Protestant background, which, in his opinion, accounted to a different style and outlook on part of Kučan.

⁵ *This process is outside the scope of this paper but I wrote about it in many publications, most directly in Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans (New York: Continuum, 1994) and Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, Publishers, 2011).*

In the summer of 1993 I travelled through parts of the already fragmented country, which was hardly recognizable on account of the overheated rhetoric, hatred, and extreme chauvinistic nationalism, Again I was Zdenko's guest for several days. By then he had become President Kučan's speech writer and confidant. Much to my surprise he arranged, on a short notice, a personal interview with the President. What astonished me was that in the midst of a still ongoing war in other parts of Yugoslavia there was only one policeman at the entrance to the President's Building and the policeman simply directed me to the second floor without checking my identifications. With no pomp or ceremony in a few minutes I was sitting and talking with the president of a country—for me not a daily occurrence! Milan Kučan acted professorially rather than "presidentially." Very expertly he analyzed the reasons for the disintegration of Yugoslavia and rather soberly analyzed Slovenia's capacity to be an independent country.⁶ Without exaggerated claims or bravado, in a down to earth manner, he weighed of pluses and minuses of the dramatic developments. Immediately I grasped why Kučan and Roter got along well.

Later our contacts became more rare. Tragedy struck the Roter family. First one of his sons in the USA died, then his wife. In the declining years of our lives it is right when friends, colleagues, and acquaintance help celebrate lifetime accomplishments of the *mahatmas*—great souls whom we were lucky to encounter along our common path in the course of this life. As a Christian who believes in the afterlife and in St. Paul's statement "that not even death will separate us from the love of God" I hope and wish that Zdenko and I and the readers of these lines will continue our friendly dialogues in another dimension.

⁶ What surprised me was his statement that Slovenia—like some of the other former republics of Yugoslavia on their way to independence—did not have enough talented leaders "for a first team" alluding to soccer team's top eleven players.