

## CROATIA: 'HISTORICAL' FAITHS FAVOURED IN DRAFT RELIGION LAW

by Branko Bjelajac and Felix Corley, Keston News Service, 4 April 2001

Croatia's Serbian Orthodox Church, the Baptists and Adventists are among minority religious communities with reservations about the latest draft of the new Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities, arguing that the bill allows the Catholic Church an unfair place of primacy and gives 'second-class status' to other religious communities. 'We want all religious groups to have equal rights,' Father Jovan, a representative of the Zagreb, Ljubljana and Italy Metropolia of the Serbian Orthodox Church, told Keston News Service. Baptist and Adventist representatives pointed to what they believe is an unjustified distinction in the bill between 'historical' religious communities and those established more recently.

At the end of January the government launched a new round of wider consultations with religious bodies over the bill. Planned to have its first reading in parliament, the Sabor, this spring, the proposed law will replace two earlier laws regulating religion, those of 1978 and 1988, both enacted when Croatia was still a constituent republic of Socialist Yugoslavia.

Religious groups were given 45 days in March to submit their comments to the government. Father Jovan, speaking from the diocesan office in the Italian city of Trieste on 3 April, reported that the Orthodox Church held a meeting at the Metropolia in Zagreb in March, at which it was decided that its comments were ready to be submitted to the Holy Synod in Belgrade. The Synod approved the comments on 31 March and, Father Jovan declared, these would be forwarded to the government by the deadline later in April. Although these comments have not yet been formally presented, Father Jovan believes the government has a good idea already of Orthodox concerns. Last November the Church submitted its comments on the original draft.

Article 4 of the latest draft recognises the Roman Catholic Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Jewish communities, the Islamic community, the Evangelical Church (Lutherans) and the Reformed Church as 'historically present churches [existing] in the territory of Croatia for more than one hundred years'. The same article recognises any other religious community in legal existence at the time the law is implemented as 'existing religious communities' and requires registration in the new register. After that, newly-founded religious communities will have to register by submitting a special application, together with a copy of their statute and details of their structure and number of adherents or members. The draft does not specify a minimum number of members required to achieve registration. Article 16 states that this will not be required from existing religious bodies.

The draft includes a provision allowing religious communities to 'conduct religious services, provide religious education and minister to members of the ministry of defence, armed forces and police'. Religious communities will be allowed to use buildings of these three state agencies on religious holidays, under regulations to be enacted by the defence and interior ministers.

The government is also planning to establish a committee for relations with

religious communities as a liaison body.

`In general, this law is not restrictive and follows the constitutional articles on equality of all citizens in their religious practices,' Giorgio Grlj, president of the Baptist Federation and member of the presidency of the Protestant Evangelical Council, told Keston on 2 April from Zagreb. `I find problematic the distinction between the "historical" and "non-historical" religious communities, but we suspect this was done so that "particular" historical communities will be allowed to sign separate concordats. Given that the previous government signed such a concordat with the Vatican even before this new law was enacted, we believe the new government will have difficulties "adjusting" the law to the international treaties to which it is subordinate.'

Miroslav Lorencin, president of the Croatian Conference of the Adventist Church, echoed Baptist concerns about the distinctions in the bill between `historical' and `non-historical' religious groups. `We are broadly happy with the draft bill, but we have a concern about this distinction,' Lorencin told Keston from Zagreb on 4 April. While stressing that his Church is in a `good situation', he said that `unfortunately' the state does not recognise the Adventists as a `historical' Church despite presence in the country since about 1900. `The earliest document attesting our presence is from 1908.'

In one of the earlier attempts to regulate religious life, the previous government under the late president Franjo Tudjman planned to require a religious group to have at least 10,000 adherents to gain state recognition, a move designed to give more prominence to established, historical groups. Minority religious groups and NGOs protested against this proposal. Another disputed issue was a provision allowing police to close down a religious community if its members were charged with anti-constitutional activity (which was aimed at Serbian Orthodox laypeople and priests then rebelling against the Croatian regime). This bill was never adopted.

However, prompted by the possibility of losing legal status because of their small membership, a number of Protestant and Evangelical Free Churches founded an umbrella organisation, the Protestant Evangelical Council, in an attempt to approach the government as a united body representing several tens of thousands of members. Since then, this body has represented many minority Christian groups in frequent talks with the government.

Renewed discussion of a new religion bill was launched in April 2000, when all Croatia's major faiths - including Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims and Jews - took part in a meeting with the then Croatian vice-premier Goran Granic. Religious groups were handed the government's draft of the bill and invited to submit their comments. Granic told religious leaders he wished for `discretion' in discussion of the bill, Father Jovan told Keston, with no news on developments being passed to the media. `However, now we can speak about it,' he added.

The new draft has already incorporated some observations noted in the first round of consultations held last November, and it is believed it is close to the official text due to be sent to parliament soon. (END)