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# INTRODUCTION: BETWEEN REVIVAL AND ATHEIZATION: STATECRAFT, IDENTITY, AND RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

This interdisciplinary special issue explores the complexities of religious transformation in societies, particularly the revival of both dominant and non-dominant religions – often intertwined with ethnicity and migration – and the attempts of atheization, within the geographical framework of former Yugoslavia throughout the long 20th century. Through historical archival research, social science analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork, the articles offer a comprehensive examination and contextualization of religious change, shedding light on the controversies surrounding freedom of religion and freedom from religion from a comparative and transnational perspective.

The studies address various forms of religious agency that transcend established norms, legal frameworks, and cultural expectations, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms driving religious change. These processes have led to the redefinition and reshaping of religious boundaries through interreligious interactions, political disputes, and national religious policies. State structures, regardless of regime type, have historically sought to control religious diversity and mitigate underlying tensions – a dynamic particularly evident in the formation and reformation of religious minorities.

The multifaceted nature of religious relations in Yugoslavia is examined from different perspectives, highlighting both divisions and shared features among various manifestations of Christianity and Islam across and within borders. Internal migration further influences these dynamics, which are examined within a broader state framework and, especially,

in regional contexts. A focus on these sociopolitical specificities is crucial for understanding religious identification – or the lack thereof – through dimensions of individual and collective choices to change religious or meaning systems, which may be voluntary or coerced, individual or collective, reflecting the fundamental distinction between the perception of religious identity as “born into” or “made.”

The multi-ethnic and multi-confessional context of Yugoslavia, the only country in Europe with significant Orthodox Christian, Catholic, and Muslim communities, serves as an ideal setting to critically analyze religious change, the heterogeneity of atheism, and the complex interplay between state and religion. This includes the politicization of religion and the religionization of politics. Tensions between national groups, rooted in centuries of conflict, become increasingly difficult to resolve when religious and ethnic boundaries overlap, thereby complicating and reinforcing particular identities. Yet, these seemingly fixed religious boundaries have consistently been reshaped and renegotiated through interactions and political interventions.

During the major shifts and social transformations in the 20th century, Yugoslav state structures sought to address a diverse range of differences – ethnic, political, cultural, economic, and religious – aiming to foster an enduring understanding between constitutive nations and ethnicities. The examination of interreligious relations and transformations during the Yugoslav period (1918–1991) and in the post-Yugoslav context reveals new dimensions of freedom of conscience and the conditions necessary for preserving religious identities, which often come into conflict. These inquiries engage with the persistent problem of representing “otherness” and the ongoing challenges related to religious equity that continue to emerge in the region.

The authors examine how state policies and shifting political contexts in the former Yugoslav space have shaped religious landscapes, identities, and practices. In the article “Religious Identity as the State’s Tool in Modification of Public Space and Its Identity: The Yugoslavian Concept of the Two Squares in Maribor,” Sara Hajdinac argues that the state actively reconfigured public space in the city on the Slovenian frontier to assert a unified Yugoslav identity. The study details how, in 1934, the renaming of General Maister Square to Yugoslavia Square

and the construction of the Serbian Orthodox Church of St. Lazarus on a site of rich symbolic history served as deliberate instruments to merge imposed religious symbols with a broader (supra)national ideology.

In “State of Governance of Religious Communities in Former Yugoslavia and the Developments of the Bahá’í Community and Jehovah’s Witnesses,” Aleksandra Zibelnik Badii, on the other hand, analyzes the experiences of smaller, unrecognized religious communities such as the Bahá’í community and Jehovah’s Witnesses over a longer time frame. Although the Yugoslav legal framework ostensibly guaranteed religious freedom and the separation of church and state, these communities faced considerable challenges. The study examines how national identity, legal compliance, and ideological alignment with the state influenced the treatment of smaller religious communities within Yugoslavia’s broader framework of religious freedom.

Contrasting the religious context, Todor Lakić, Boris Vukićević, and Saša Knežević discuss secularization and atheization policies in Montenegro after World War II in the study “The Dynamics of Atheization in Postwar Communist Montenegro.” The authors highlight the intense secularization efforts, particularly from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, and examine the state’s relations with religious communities. Montenegro experienced the most intense secularization and atheization among the Yugoslav republics. The research also analyzes the impact of religious policies on Montenegro’s three largest religious communities.

Based on fieldwork, Jadranka Đorđević Crnobrnja, in “The Prohibition of Women’s Veiling in the Region of Gora,” analyzes the ban on veiling women in the Gora region in the Autonomous Region of Kosovo-Metohija, introduced by the People’s Republic of Serbia in 1951. This radical measure, intended to promote the emancipation of women and gender equality, disrupted long-established cultural practices of the Gorani community. The ban on traditional clothing such as headscarves and *terlik*, not only undermined religious customs but also erased symbols of marital status. The article highlights the conflict between state-imposed secular ideologies, religious freedom and indigenous cultural identities.

Presenting religious policy in late socialist Slovenia, Jure Ramšak, in “The Problem with Courtesy: Wooing the Catholic Church in Late Socialist Slovenia,” examines the relatively calm and cooperative relations between the Catholic Church and state authorities. It highlights how Slovenian religious policy was seen as a model for integrating believers into modern socialist society and was positively presented to international audiences. Up until 1990, communication between Party officials and the Church was courteous, and local priests generally received support for initiatives such as building new churches. However, independent intellectuals – Catholics and Marxists alike – who called for genuine dialogue on religion were marginalized, leaving an ambiguous legacy for Slovenia’s late socialist religious policy.

Exploring another dominant religion, “Serbian Press and Eastern Orthodoxy in Serbia in the 1980s,” by Petar Dragišić, analyses Serbian press coverage of the resurgence of Eastern Orthodoxy in Serbia during the 1980s, using influential newspapers and magazines. He reconstructs perceptions of the revival of religiosity and identify its root causes. The research found a close link between the revival of religiosity and the changing political environment in Serbia during the 1980s, suggesting that rising ethnic tensions, particularly in relation to Kosovo, catalyzed a renewed public religiosity, which in turn strengthened the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the late 1980s.

Depicting post-Yugoslav circumstances in the Slovenian religious field, Igor Jurekovič, in “Charismatic Christianity as Primal Spirituality? Some Observations from Slovenia,” considers the global emergence of Charismatic Christianity, noting that social scientists often focus on responses to social modernization, while theologians emphasize theological innovations inherent to Charismatic Christianity. Harvey Cox’s theory is highlighted, attributing the appeal of Charismatic Christianity to its embodiment of primal spirituality through fundamental speech, piety, and hope. The article aims to elucidate Cox’s argument, acknowledging both the strengths and limitations of his approach and providing insights from fieldwork among Charismatics in Slovenia.

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