

3-2015

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Recommended Citation

Magda, Ela (2015) "In Search of a Crisis in Croatia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol35/iss2/3>

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IN SEARCH OF A CRISIS IN CROATIA

By Ela Magda

Ela Magda is the secretary of the women's ecumenical organization "World Day of Prayer" in Croatia. Ela Magda was born in 1989 in Osijek, Croatia, to Christian parents as the youngest of four children. In 2010, she earned her Bachelor of Arts in Theology at the Matija Vlačić Ilirik Faculty in the University of Zagreb, and in 2011, graduated with a Master of Philosophy in Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies from the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College, Dublin. Currently living in Osijek, Croatia, she is the secretary of the women's ecumenical organization "World Day of Prayer Croatia" and is also involved with the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women in Croatia.

Recently, a Croatian evangelical theologian, Dr. Peter Kuzmič, appeared on a Croatian talk show, *Nedjeljom u 2* [trans. "Sundays at 2 pm"], and commented that one can notice a growing nationalist tendency in Croatia. Of course, all throughout history and especially after Croatia's Homeland war (1991–1995), nationalism was present in Croatia. However, recently the nationalist feeling has become slightly stronger than it was in recent years (mid-2000s).

In 2009, Croatia, along with the rest of the world, entered the economic recession. Many things were happening on the political scene, and a new, left-oriented¹ government was ready to take over; Croatia was on the verge of becoming a member of the European Union and was putting its foot in the door that led to the West, opening up questions of human rights for all people regardless of their national background, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. All these factors, among many others, triggered nationalist feelings in this small, predominately Roman Catholic country.

¹ In this context, "left-oriented government" means a socialist, more liberal (non-conservative) government, as opposed to "right-oriented," which means nationalist and conservative.

Croatia is a post-war country, and religion has played a major role throughout history, at times used as a political tool to create nationalist feelings and strengthen national identity—often by demonizing the religious and ethnic Other. Today, twenty years after the last war, the context of the country is changing as it turns towards the West. Religion, in this case the Roman Catholic Church, still plays a role in people’s lives; however, it seems to be only preserving the status quo—in other words, it is still trying to act according to its historic role. Unfortunately, this does not profit the younger generations. They consequently inherit worldviews based on this religio-nationalist identity that is reinforced through secondhand war memories. Young people are not given the space or the impetus to refashion their worldviews, to learn about and meet the Other, and this prevents a way forward.

There is a saying, “the world is left to the young”—a saying often directed to me as a young person, and one I believe to be true. Precisely because of this belief, in this essay I will explore the importance of memory—how mythical memories, the Homeland war, and war memories are influencing new generations of young people, who although they have not experienced the war firsthand, experience parts of it every day through their family, peers, and the media. Further, I will reflect upon how these “secondhand memories” influence their faith and openness to the religious and ethnic Other. Finally, I suggest that there is an acute need for opportunities where young people can experience the Other—the one who has long been the stranger and the enemy—in a different context. In this, the church has an opportunity to exercise its current influence—to use ecumenical dialogue as means of creating a new context in which young people can develop their own worldviews, apart from the memories of their ancestors, and create a new way of thinking that will help transform the society in which they live.

My research and conclusions for this essay primarily come from the available research

and my own experience as a young person in post-war Croatia. There is need for much deeper research of this issue, but hopefully this essay is a small step in that direction.

A Yugoslavian scientist and publicist, Ivo Pilar, wrote in his book *Južnoslavensko Pitanje* ["The Yugoslavian Question"] that there is a tendency among the Slavic people to submit to the authority of emotion rather than authority of reason.² The book was published in 1943, but the truth of this statement remains to this day. An example can be found in a recent newspaper interview, where Josip Glaurdić, a Cambridge lecturer, stated that based on research conducted throughout Croatia, Croatian "war time and post-war experiences . . . in large part determine [Croatian] political choices."³ Though political leadership should be chosen based on efficiency and effectiveness, this research showed that there is a tendency among Croatians to vote with war memories in mind. Twenty years after the war, one has to question the rationale behind people's choices.

While discussing myths in the Balkans that have shaped Balkan national identities, Paul Mojzes stated that "[c]oncepts of the past and the present are so intermixed that a grievance of long ago is perceived as a present affliction."⁴ Memories, and especially mythical memories, seem to have always been of great importance for people in the Balkans. In the midst of various turbulences throughout history, Croatia's national identity, namely its culture and tradition, was kept and reinforced through the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia. Religion not only preserved, but also created a sacred myth around the Croatian national identity. A statue of Ante Starčević, (politician and president of the Croatian Party of Rights in the nineteenth century), who is also known as "the father of the state," was placed in the main square in Osijek, my hometown, a few

² L. von Südland [Ivo Pilar], *Južnoslavensko Pitanje* (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1943), 7.

³ "Nama je domovinski rat još uvijek važniji od ekonomije!" last modified on December 8, 2013, <http://www.jutarnji.hr/josip-glaurdic--brojke-ne-lazu--nama-je-domovinski-rat-jos-uvijek-vazniji-od-ekonomije/1145289/> (my own translation).

⁴ Paul Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 40.

years ago. Below the statue is a quote that says, “Only the laws of God and nature are above the sovereign will of the people of Croatia. God and Croats.”

Mythical memories engraved in the Croatian national identity were important political tools in the 1990s war, and they continue to be important political tools today. In recent months we have been witnessing a growing nationalist tendency evident in protests against the placement of two-alphabet (Latin and Cyrillic) signs in areas where Serbs in Croatia live as a minority.⁵ On October 1, 2013, a unit was formed in Vukovar under the name (trans.) “Headquarters for the Defense of Croatian Vukovar.” This has strong war connotations because Vukovar, a town that borders Serbia, was a multiethnic town before and after the war. During the war, it became a symbol of love for one’s country and praised as a hero-town, due to the fact that it was under siege for eighty-seven days and eventually could not resist any more; many men and women died defending it, and many people had to leave their homes. Therefore, when one begins talking about “defense of Croatian Vukovar,” it inevitably stirs up memories of war and feelings of belonging to a sacred nation that will once again defend itself against the enemy. People are making sure the war is not forgotten.

While volunteering as a youth leader at teenage summer and winter camps in Croatia, I observed that it was difficult for the 17–19 year olds to critically think about questions and issues, and often replied with rather superficial answers without arguments to support them. However, they perceived themselves as adults, and wanted to be able to make their own life choices. As frustrating as it was to encourage young high school graduates to answer questions with meaningful answers, it also makes sense that they cannot give a deeper or a more

⁵ Although Croatian and Serbian are very similar (in the days of Yugoslavia the language was called Serbo-Croatian), Croatian uses the Latin alphabet and Serbian uses the Cyrillic. See the essay, “Vukovar: Encountering the Other through the Collective War Memory,” in this issue for more insight into this ongoing conflict.

meaningful critical answer when one takes into account their broader context.

A Croatian news portal recently published an article about the rising identity crisis among young people.⁶ The article's claims are supported by an overwhelming amount of newspaper articles about growing violence and bullying among youth. However, I would argue that the problem is not so much an identity crisis, but a lack of one. As I shall discuss further on, a crisis is of crucial importance if beliefs and traditions are to be reevaluated.

It is common knowledge that adolescents are impressionable and subject to various influences;⁷ because of that, it is important to think about their context and what shapes their worldview, morals, etc. When thinking about the development of identity in the post-war generation of young people (namely, the generation born during or after the 1990s war) I have found the Canadian psychologist James Marcia's theory very relevant. Marcia talks about the four "identity statuses," which are "four modes of dealing with the identity issue characteristic of late adolescents."⁸ One of the statuses is *foreclosure*, which, according to Angela Oswalt, is characterized by "a low degree of exploration but a high degree of commitment."⁹ This status refers to adolescents who show strong preference towards certain ideologies but lack arguments and personal experience that would explain why those ideologies were chosen.¹⁰ Marcia also states that adolescents in the foreclosure status are "most endorsing of authoritarian values among the identity statuses";¹¹ they are "lowest on the autonomy scale¹² and highest on need for

⁶ "Sve izraženiija kriza mladih," last modified on June 6, 2012, <http://www.dnevno.hr/kolumne/zlatko-milisa/59525-sve-izrazeniija-kriza-identiteta-mladih.html> (my own translation).

⁷ Marjan Ninčević, "Izgradnja adolescentskog identiteta u današnje vrijeme," *Odgovne Znanosti* 11 (2009): 123.

⁸ James Marcia, "Identity in Adolescence," in *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, ed. Joseph Adelson (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1980), 111.

⁹ "James Marcia and Self Identity," last modified on November 17, 2010, http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=41164&cn=1310.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Marcia, "Identity in Adolescence," 113.

social approval,”¹³ and are impulsive and less culturally sophisticated.¹⁴ Also, there is a lack of the “crisis” that Marcia mentions when discussing “foreclosures”: a crisis/stressful event that prompts an individual to reexamine and reevaluate her/his choices, worldviews, etc., and to “experiment with different values, beliefs, and goals.”¹⁵ Therefore, the beliefs and traditions of the family, authority figures, and peers, etc. are “transcribed” onto the young person and remain there if there is no factor that pushes her/him to question and reevaluate those beliefs and traditions.

When Croatia won a soccer match against Iceland recently, one of the Croatian players started shouting a World War II battle cry that was used by Croatian nationalists *Ustaše*, “*Za dom spremni!*” [trans. “Ready to defend our home!”], and the crowd (mostly consisting of younger people) followed. That incident is a textbook example of the mindset of the younger generations in Croatia. When adults refuse to let go of the past, it influences the youth.

Looking at the younger generations today, a pattern can be detected—a lack of personal or collective crisis; a lack of any kind of trigger that could shake the foundations and change traditions. In her article “Adam, Our Father: How the Apostle Paul ‘Improved’ Traditions and Confirmed the Scriptures,” New Testament scholar Ksenija Magda thinks about the reevaluation of tradition and writes,

If one were to think about [Paul’s] *worldview* or the *social construction of the world* as it is popular, one must not leave out the force of the *place*. When tension is created between the place and the elements in a realm,

¹² EPPS—Edwards Personal Preference Schedule—is a psychological tool that helps to rate individuals based on their preferences of provided choices. “Report on Edwards Personal Preference Schedule,” last modified on October 26, 2010, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/40156050/The-Edwards-Personal-Preference-Schedule>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁵ “James Marcia and Self Identity.” Ksenija Magda, “Adam, naš otac: Kako je apostol Pavao ‘popravio’ tradicije, a potvrdio Pisma,” *Obnovljeni život* 3 (2013): 389. Available at http://hrcak.srce.hr/index.php?show=clanak&id_clanak_jezik=162854.

this inevitably leads to a re-evaluation of elements which are connected with them, until an acceptable balance is found.¹⁶

Taking this idea for a moment out of Paul's context and placing it in Croatia's, it would mean that when a situation in a place is stirred by new factors, it leads to rethinking and reexamining the situation and searching for a new way of existing in harmony.

New generations of young Croats are raised with mythical memories about the war and the enemy, and are creating a world in which an imaginary war against "the enemy" is still fought every day in football matches, concerts, schools, etc. Young people are becoming carriers of secondhand memories that are molding them into persons who are unable or unwilling to think critically and are emotionally conditioned. Religion remains "the bastion of Croatian national identity,"¹⁷ and unquestioned traditions are still sacred.

Socrates said that people do not do evil because they are evil, but because they are ignorant. How, then, can this ignorance be challenged, and by what method can youth be encouraged to reevaluate the tradition and beliefs in Croatia? I will not attempt to analyze the educational system and suggest that it be changed (although it does need to change), or to reevaluate parenting techniques (although there is need for that as well). Rather, I suggest that a step towards the solution is to create a crisis through dialogue—shaking one's foundations by creating situations where interaction comes spontaneously.

Churches have a distinct role to play in facilitating this process. Unfortunately, churches (of all denominations) have been overly concerned with politics, preserving traditions, increasing membership, and perhaps have been unwilling themselves to reevaluate their own traditions. In

¹⁶ Ksenija Magda, "Adam, naš otac: Kako je apostol Pavao »popravio« tradicije, a potvrdio Pisma," *Obnovljeni život* 3 (2013): 389. Available at http://hrcak.srce.hr/index.php?show=clanak&id_clanak_jezik=162854.

¹⁷ Mitja Velikonja, *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Texas: A&M University Press, 2003), 114.

other words, churches have not been oriented toward dialogue with the religious and ethnic Other. However, since the churches are a source of traditions that young people grow up in and adopt as their own, it is their responsibility to help young people on their journey to becoming fully formed individuals.

One of the ways churches can do this in the Croatian context is through ecumenical dialogue. In this context, ecumenical dialogue means finding practical, everyday ways of communicating with those who are different and sharing something that transcends traditional and doctrinal differences. Being part of ecumenical dialogue is just the kind of “crisis” that could help young people break through the dead parts of their religious tradition and reevaluate the worldviews that they inherited from their parents and churches.

There are a variety of options churches can use to help young people transcend their context and change their perspective. Using youth culture and things liked by young people to promote dialogue between youth of different nationalities and religious traditions has, in my experience, proven to be effective. When two seemingly different individuals find that they share an interest, doors open in all other areas as well. I have witnessed this as a young theologian studying ecumenics in a foreign country, as a youth leader at camps with teenagers from Croatia and Serbia, and as a dancer, meeting young people from all over former Yugoslavia who have reevaluated their own traditions in order to share a common interest with someone different. Meeting the Other, learning about her, and sharing with her, brings her closer to us and makes it impossible for us to demonize her. The churches have a unique opportunity to capitalize on this opportunity in order to create a new state of mind and offer a new perspective to young people. Ultimately, such influence could have a transformative effect on Croatian society and create new memories of peaceful coexistence for future generations.