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Ervin Budiselić

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# **RELIGIOUS COERCION AS PART OF A RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: CROATIAN PERSPECTIVE**

**By Ervin Budiselić**

Ervin Budiselić, mag. theol. Completed at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia, and currently working on his PhD dissertation in New Testament Studies at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. He is a lecturer at the Biblical Institute in Zagreb, Croatia, where he teaches courses in the New Testament and hermeneutics.

## **Introduction**

In religious terms, Croatia is an Eastern European country predominately shaped by Christianity. According to the last census from 2011, there are 86.28 percent Catholics, 4.44 percent Orthodox and 1.47 percent Muslims.<sup>1</sup> In the last 20 to 30 years, Croatia's religious identity as a Christian country was challenged on several occasions. Nationalistic and religious tensions between Croats and Serbs occurred in the 1990s when Croatia and Serbia were at war. Although the war was between two secular countries, the religious component was also significant. Priests of the Serbian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church prayed for their own troops, pronounced blessings over weapons and people before going into battle, and many people of both sides died with symbols of their faith such as a rosary or cross.

Another dispute which challenged Croatian religious identity in the past several years, and still shapes public discourse is the issue of the so-called LGBTQ rights, and consequently, the deconstruction of family and social relationships which this agenda brings. Heavily supported by the leftist government, which in 2016 lost the election, imposition of this agenda produced many public disputes and "Game of Thrones" fights. Consequently, all those who valued traditional Christian morality were accused and labeled as traditionalists, fascists, homophobes, haters, etc. The Roman Catholic Church was at the forefront of this controversy and still continues to fight against changing the traditional definitions of human beings and family.

<sup>1</sup>Croatian Bureau of Statistics., *Census of Population, Households and Dwellings 2011, Population by Citizenship, Ethnicity, Religion and Mother Tongue. Statistical Report.* Zagreb 2013. Available at [http://www.dzs.hr/Hrv\\_Eng/publication/2012/SI-1469.pdf](http://www.dzs.hr/Hrv_Eng/publication/2012/SI-1469.pdf).

Now in 2016, Croatia is in the midst of another global phenomenon which brings to the surface another religious tension, the migration of Muslims from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe, and consequently the spread of Islam into “Christian” Europe. Although Croatia is currently only a transit country, 1.47 percent of the population in Croatia declares themselves as Muslims, but more importantly, Croatia borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina where 48.4 percent of the population are Muslims. Hence, religious identity of these two communities play and will play a significant part in international and interpersonal communication, especially as a number of Muslims will multiply in the future.

These introductory examples show that Christianity in the form of Roman Catholicism is deeply embedded in Croatian society, although the Roman Catholic Church is not a “state church.” However, what we will see in this article is that this religious identity was imposed on Croats by force centuries ago. Hence, if this *religious* identity was imposed by force or some form of outside coercion, the question is: can such identity in the name of Christ be assessed as a positive value and gain the status of *tradition*? If our answer is “yes,” then supporters of this view must offer an apology for the “paradigm shift” in which religious coercion in the course of time becomes a desirable and positive element of one’s religious identity. If our answer is “no,” then we must reject coercion as a way of forming one’s religious identity and offer an alternative way.

In order to analyze this subject, first we will briefly show how Emperor Constantine’s conversion brought into Christianity the element of coercion. Second, we will discuss various theories of spreading Christianity among Croats, and third, we will assess its impact. Fourth, we will briefly analyze New Testament’s teaching on the issue of coercion in conversion, and fifth, offer an assessment of the current religious situation in Croatia. Finally, a conclusion on the subject will follow.

## **1. Christianity in the First Four Centuries**

In the first four centuries, Christianity was a religion that spread primarily “from below,” following the example of their Lord who manifested a life of submission, sacrifice and service. Early Christians gained their converts through preaching, debate and apologia, service and good example, and all that was accompanied with occasional persecutions and martyrdom. While affecting both the lower (predominately) and upper classes, it was in no way imposed “from above” by some form of coercion.

According to some estimation, at the beginning of the fourth century, the population of the Roman Empire counted approximately 60 million people, and Christians made

approximately 10 percent of the population of the Empire.<sup>2</sup> However, things significantly changed with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in 312 A.D. It is estimated that in 350 A.D., 56 percent of the population were Christians,<sup>3</sup> and by the end of the fourth century, the number is estimated at about 90 percent of the population. As James B. North and Don Umphrey observe, “The population of the empire at this time was estimated to be between 50 million and 75 million. Even if we take the smaller figure, that means the number of Christians jumped from five million to 45 million in less than a century.”<sup>4</sup> Based on Eusebius’s report that Christians were the majority throughout the Empire by 311 A.D., Christopher R. Petruzzi calculated that the population of the Roman Empire in 312 A.D. is estimated by most historians to have been around 100 million. If Christians were a majority, there were at least 50 million Christians in 312 A.D., and he takes this figure as the high estimate of the number of Christians. If Christians were a minority, they were a significant minority, and he uses 12.5 million as the low estimate number of Christians in 312 A.D. Taking the calculation that the number of Christians doubled on average at the quickest, every 19 years, or at least every 23.75 years, this can explain that Christians might have been only 15 percent of the population in 274 A.D. and yet by 312 A.D., they made 60 percent of the population.<sup>5</sup>

Although calculations about the number of Christians always consist of speculation, I agree with James William Ermatinger who argues that even after Constantine legalized and favored Christianity in 312 A.D., the number of Christians in cities was not great, and even less in the countryside. “In essence Christianity remained a small minority until continual imperial pressure, laws, and patronage supplanted paganism. Christianity was then tied closely to imperial history, especially in its success in increasing throughout the empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the element of *coercion* became a regular part of Christianity which was implemented both against other Christian groups and pagans. As Paula Fredriksen has noticed, prior to Constantine’s conversion, “polemic between different groups had fundamentally been name calling; now, the invective of one side could inform government policy. The first Romans to feel the negative effects of Constantine’s new religious

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rodney Stark. *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 7; James B. North & Don Umphrey. *A History of the Church: From Pentecost to the Present* (Joplin: College Press, 2007), 85.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Stark, 7.

<sup>4</sup> North & Don Umphrey, 85.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Christopher R. Petruzzi. *Christianity and Politics: The Attempted Seduction of the Bride of Christ* (Eugene:Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), 19-20.

<sup>6</sup> James William Ermatinger. *Daily Life of Christians in Ancient Rome* (Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 2006), 19.

allegiance, in short, were other Christians.”<sup>7</sup> Constantine’s conversion also set the motion toward coercion of other religions since in 392 A.D. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire while all other religions were prohibited.

## 2. Spreading of Christianity among Croats

Although a systematic and chronological survey of the spreading of Christianity in the Balkan areas is not possible in this article, some brief and elementary data will be sufficient to see in what way Christianity became a part of the religious identity of Croats. The process of how Croats became Christians is ambiguous. As Danijel Džino notes:

The scholarship was divided in its views on the so-called conversion of the Croats. One view was that the Croats were converted to Christianity in the 7th century, under the influence of the ecclesiastic structures which survived in the Dalmatian cities immediately after their supposed settlement....The other view was that the Croats were converted by the Frankish missionaries who arrived in Dalmatia in the 9th century, probably from Aquileia. More recent Croatian scholarship has supported firmly the thesis of the Frankish impact on the Croat conversion in the 9th century, and is more ready to approach the complexity of the problem of conversion, distinguishing between the elite Christianity and the popular forms of Christianity, which existed at the same time.<sup>8</sup>

Each theory has its strengths and weaknesses, but the biggest problem for us represent the fact that, as Džino states, there is no written evidence for a formal Croat conversion.<sup>9</sup> And instead to argue for one grand-narrative that Croats *first* came in the contact with Christianity in the seventh or in the ninth century, it is best to view the process of Christianization of Croats as a long-term process, which was influenced through a number of different overlapping processes.<sup>10</sup>

Rejecting the theory that Croats first came in the contact with Christianity via Frankish missionaries, Dominik Mandić argues that Byzantine emperors were regarded as living symbols of divinity, God’s representatives on earth chosen and called to spread and protect the true Christian Church. Hence, they did all they could to Christianize all pagan nations with whom they establish governmental or friendship relationships (16-17).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Paula Fredriksen “Christians in the Roman Empire in the First Three Centuries CE.” In: David S. Potter (ed.), *A Companion to the Roman Empire*, 587-606 (Chicester: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 588.

<sup>8</sup> Danijel Džino. *Becoming Slav, Becoming Croat* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010), 203. There is a third theory called Gothic theory that Croats came the area of Dalmatia as Arian Christians and they were made Catholics. But we will not discuss this theory because it is irrelevant for this article.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Dominik Mandić. “Papa Ivan IV. Solinjanin i pokrštenje Hrvata.” *Croatia Christiana Periodica*. Vol. 6 No. 29, 1992, 29.

Furthermore, Croats were introduced to Christianity from various regional centers. Mitja Velikonja observes:

Croats living in Dalmatia were baptized by Roman missionaries in the seventh and eighth centuries, those living in Istria and the northwest were baptized by missionaries from Aquilea, and those living in the southeast by missionaries from Constantinople. The contributions of two missionaries, Cyril and Methodius, were especially significant: in addition to the comprehensive cultural legacy of the glagolitic alphabet (glagolitic writing, Slavonic liturgy), which they bequeathed to the Slavs, their disciples baptized the Croats and spread Christianity throughout the territory (P. 40).<sup>12</sup>

Complementary to Velikonja, Franjo Šanjek observes that Christianity first started in Dalmatia in the middle of the seventh century and then continued to spread in Istria and Coastal region (Primorje) of Croatia predominately due to the work of Frankish authorities at the end of the eighth and beginning of the ninth century. And the Byzantine Empire was responsible for Christianizing the Croatian tribes in the region of Duklja, Zahumlje, and in the region of the river Neretva.<sup>13</sup>

No matter which theory is correct, the primary interest of this article is not to settle the question how and when Croats became Christians, but to detect the element of coercion in making someone a member of a particular religion. One of the most significant sources for the study of the interaction between Croats and Christianity is the document *De Administrando Imperio* (DAI), written in the tenth century by the Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, who in chapters 29, 30, and 31 writes about the baptism of Croats. As it is noted, in these chapters, DAI skips from the seventh century to the first half of the ninth century. Putting aside possible interpretations of events in these chapters, we will focus on the element of coercion in bringing Croats to Christianity.

In chapter 29, Porphyrogenitus states in the time prior to Emperor Basil I (867–886), Slavs became independent and self-governing. But in the time of Basil, the Christ-loving emperor, they sent diplomatic agents begging him that those who were unbaptized might receive baptism and that they might be subject to the empire of the Romans. The emperor sent them “imperial agents and priests” who baptized them, and also “appointed for them princes whom they themselves approved and chose.”<sup>14</sup> But what was the motive for such action? In 866, Saracens attacked some Dalmatian’s cities (Budva and Kotor) and for 15

<sup>12</sup> Mitja Velikonja. *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 20.

<sup>13</sup> Franjo Šanjek. “Počeci kršćanstva u Hrvatskoj.” *Crkva u svijetu* Vol. 11 No. 3, 1976, 209.

<sup>14</sup> R. J. H. Jenkins (transl.). *Constantine Porphyrogenitus de Administrando Imperio Vol: 1* (Washington: Center for Byzantine Studies Trustees for Harvard University, 1985), 125-127.

months, they laid siege around the city of Ragusa (Dubrovnik). Faced with such challenge, Slavs decided to submit to Byzantine Empire and that submission was followed by gradual religious reformation from paganism to Christianity.

In chapter 30, Porphyrogenitus states that for a number of years, Croats of Dalmatia were subjects to Franks who treated them brutally. So Croats revolted against them and after seven years of fighting, they defeated Frankish armies and killed their leader, Kotzilis. After that, from the bishop of Rome, they requested baptism and this baptism occurred during the time of the Croatian prince, Porinos.<sup>15</sup> So once again we see that submission to Christianity was motivated by outward elements.

And in chapter 31, Porphyrogenitus speaks about how Croats who now lived in Dalmatia claimed the protection of Emperor Heraclius (died 641). Avars expelled Romans from countries that were settled by Emperor Diocletian, but by the command of Emperor Heraclius, Croats defeated and expelled the Avars from those same counties and by the emperor's mandate, settled there. The text then continues on to state that after that, Emperor Heraclius sent and brought priests from Rome and baptized Croats whose prince at that time was Porgas. Furthermore, Croats made a covenant, binding it in the name of St. Peter, that never would they go upon a foreign country and make war on it. But if someone were to attack them, the pope of Rome gave them a benediction that in that case, God would fight for the Croats and protect them, and Peter the disciple of Christ, will give them victory.<sup>16</sup> As in previous cases, the acceptance of Christianity was motivated by some outward elements.

The process of conversion of Croats to Christianity lasted for several centuries. Although this process in itself contained the element of evangelization, in the DAI document we have seen that reasons for conversion did not originate from religious conviction but were a result of an outward pressure primarily motivated by mere survival or some sort of economic, military, political, or social interest. For example, rejecting the Frankish baptismal theory, Dominik Mandić argues that Byzantine emperors were regarded as living symbols of divinity, God's representatives on earth chosen and called to spread and protect true Christian Church. Hence, by all means they tried to Christianize pagan nations with whom they establish governmental or friendship relationships.<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, it is hard not to see the element of coercion in the spreading of Christianity. Furthermore, the acceptance of Christianity meant the transfer from gentile to universal religion and it was a condition for

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Jenkins, 143-145.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Jenkins, 149.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Mandić, 16-17.

entrance in the Roman (Western or Frankish) or Byzantine civilizational circle. For that matter, it was a *conditio sine qua non* for any social or political progress. Due to these factors, it is not surprising that in this process, tribal leaders, rulers and their entourage were baptized first, and then slowly but surely so were the rest of the people.<sup>18</sup> Franjo Šanjek states that the conversion of rulers or a ruling class would regularly speed up and enhance the process of conversion of the general population.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Assessment

This brief historical survey reveals that the major shift in the spreading of Christianity was its merging with political power. Starting with Constantine, Christianity was driven by evangelistic motives but also political power. In the society where the Emperor had huge power over his subjects, and where the concept of “individual freedom” was not known, it is needless to think that things could be different. When we consider the question of Croats and Christianity, the same pattern is noticeable. It is hard to define precisely, but it seems that conversion to Christianity was to the some extent, if not primarily, motivated by some outside factors which can be labelled as *coercive*—whether it was for personal or social gain, protection and security, securing a military victory, following the example of an elite, etc.

Due to these elements, we can say that Croats became Christianized due to some form of *coercion*, and we can label coercion as a form of *violence*. Accordingly, when from today’s perspective, it is claimed that Croatia is traditionally a Catholic country, it basically means to offer an apology for religious violence done in the name of Christ as something acceptable and desirable. But apology is not the only problem in this case. The other phenomenon that occurs is that generations of people to this day value their religious heritage as a crucial part of their identity. In other words, the significant segment of Croatian society today would proudly point out that they are Catholics and would boldly claim the maxims “God, family and homeland” (“*Bog, obitelj i domovina*”) and/or “God and Croats” (“*Bog i Hrvati*”). But the underlying problem is that this identity is based on *coercion* and/or *violence*.

So we have a paradox: some group or groups of people centuries ago decided to become Catholic but their decision also became mandatory for generations to come. Their commitment bound future generations to the point where this act of commitment due to coercion became unavoidable, necessary and even a desirable part of national identity.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Vedran Duančić. “Hrvatska između Bizanta i Franačke.” *Pro tempore* No. 5, 2008, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Šanjek, 208.



Notwithstanding the historical development and context in which these events occurred, there is nothing wrong if a nation has a particular religious identity, but if we speak about Christianity, this identity ought to be the fruit of evangelization and personal decision of people to follow Jesus as Christ in every generation, and not the fruit of collective mandatory label. In order to support this conclusion, we will now turn to the New Testament's teaching about coercion and conversion.

#### **4. New Testament Perspective on Coercion and Conversion**

Our understanding of the New Testament teaching on the subject of conversion and salvation highly depends on our preconceptions. The Roman Catholic Church has a sacrament of baptism in which even little babies through this sacrament become members of the Church and are included in the process of salvation. Some Protestant Churches also practice infant baptism and have a similar rhetoric, but they also value the need for personal commitment in order to be saved. On the other hand, some Evangelical churches which have an Anabaptist outlook on this issue, do not consider infant baptism valid in any shape or form, and highly point to the need for the personal decision to follow Jesus. Hence, *evangelism* is the only way an individual can become Christian, and for that a *personal decision* is needed. Since theologically in this regard, I belong to the Anabaptist tradition, my reasoning on this subject will follow this track.

Jesus' background is Judaism. In Judaism, Yahweh elected Israel among all other nations, to be his people, but from Exodus 19:3-8, we can see that Yahweh did not did not coerce Israelites into a relationship with him nor did Yahweh decide it instead of them. In v. 4, Yahweh recapitulates what he has done for them, and in vv. 5-6 he extends his offer to Israelites. Commenting on the expression "so now, if..." at the beginning of v. 5, John I. Durham states:

"So now, if" sets the frame for Yahweh's expectation of Israel in voluntary response. Yahweh is not forcing these people to serve him, as some conquering king might do; that is but one of the drawbacks of too close an equation of this and other OT covenant passages with ANE covenant formulary, both real and conjectured. This "so now, if" is not even the offer of a "choice between obedience or disobedience," as Muilenburg (*VT* 9 [1959] 353) has suggested. Yahweh is here offering Israel the means of appropriate response to what he has done for them, if they choose to make it. The correct comparison is with Josh 24:15, "choose for yourselves this day" (also introduced by  $\alpha\varsigma$ ), rather than with the "you shall ..." of those who have made a commitment to Yahweh. What Israel is to do *if* they choose to make a response to what Yahweh has done is to pay the most careful attention to

his instruction concerning what is expected of them and then to “keep,” that is, to abide by, the terms of his covenant.<sup>20</sup>

Although Israelites at Sinai voluntarily entered in the covenant with God, the decision of that generation affected their posterity because their children were born as members of the covenant community, and every male Israelite through circumcision received the sign of the covenant on his body. In this regard, Israelites born after Sinai did not have a choice.

In the beginning of the gospels, we see that the message of John the Baptist and Jesus was oriented toward Israelites. In essence, their message was: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt 3:2; 4:17, NRSV) or “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15, NRSV). The message is designated to the members of the *covenant community* to respond *individually* on the calling of God to repentance if they want to participate in the coming kingdom. Being a member of that special collective or community called Israel does not *per se* guarantee God’s acceptance and salvation in the coming kingdom. The gospel of John is especially interesting on the topic of believing because throughout the gospel one can see John’s different usage of the concept of believing. Accordingly, in 2:11 Jesus’ disciples believe him because they saw a miracle, but in 2:23-24, John writes about people who believe in Jesus but Jesus does not believe them. In 4:41, Samaritans believe in Jesus solely based on his words/teaching while in 6:26, some follow Jesus because he fed them. In 6:66, we have a situation where John states that many of Jesus’s disciples (!!!) abandoned him, and in 8:31, we have a situation where those who believed in him, after Jesus denied them right to call themselves “children of Abraham” (8:39), wanted to kill him (8:40). It is astonishing that John would define certain people as believers in Jesus (8:31) and then he would state that they wanted to kill him.

If Jesus during his ministry to Israel was emphasizing individual response to his message, the same emphasis is present in Jesus’ instruction to his disciples about their ministry after his ascension:

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age* (Matt 28:18-20).

<sup>20</sup> J. I. Durham. *Vol. 3: Exodus* (Dallas: Word Books, 1998), 262.

*Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:15-16).*

*...and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47).*

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).*

From the quoted texts, we can see that Jesus aims for “all nations” (Matt 28:18-20), but the method of reaching is through proclamation, teaching, witnessing, baptizing. The early church following the example of their Lord did just that: they witnessed, proclaimed, taught, and baptized people—sometimes at great personal cost. Jesus nowhere explicitly or implicitly stated that other methods beside the already mentioned should be employed. Furthermore, faith in the Gospel message as an expression of one’s individual choice is the crucial thing for one’s salvation, but the goal is not only to save people but to make them disciples. And finally, the power language is also present in these texts: “authority”, “power,” and “condemnation,” but we can clearly see that this has nothing to do with any form of external coercion or interest besides the coercion or conviction that comes from the word of God, the power of the Spirit and Jesus’ authority to save or condemn people.

## **5. The Position of Christianity in Croatia Today**

As we have seen thus far, Croatia indeed has Christian roots, but we have also identified the deviation from the New Testament standards that occurred in the Christianization of Croats. By aligning with political power in the fourth century, Christianity stepped into the phase where it’s original call to make disciples was combined with temporary prestige, power, influence, and wealth. In this way, Christianity entered and spread among the Croats (and many other nations), and the result today is significant: *the lack of quality*.

In terms of Christianity and Christians, in Croatian society, there is a big gap between *nominal* and *practical* values. While God, family, and homeland are nominal values, in practice, consumerism, materialism, and hedonism drive our reality. The majority of Croats are *de jure* Catholics—Catholics who have superficial faith and are unconverted, unregenerate “believers.” This is observable whenever such “believers” continuously lie, swear, steal, are

unfaithful to their spouses, believe in and practice various Eastern religions, participate in the occult, accept New Age philosophies, etc., and yet at the same time, consider themselves Christians. A good example on a larger scale is that during and after the war (1990-1995 i.e. 1998), Croatia was financially devastated by so called “privatization.” During the 1990s, the governing party was on the political right and their politicians presented themselves as great patriots and Catholics. Hence, the churches were full, but so were the pockets. Obviously, the quantity was there for centuries, but the quality is permanently missing. That is why it is justifiable to say that the major problem of the Roman Catholic Church was that their members are *sacramentalized* but not *evangelized*.

With the ending of the communist era in the beginning of the 1990s, Croatia experienced an awakening of its national identity, and concomitantly its religious identity. Christianity in Croatia, which was suppressed during communism, suddenly experienced a new form of freedom and began to regain its influence, and much of that came as a result of the historical connection between Croats and Christianity. However, this reawakening of Christianity occurred in the context of *secularization* where Christianity no longer has any monopoly in society, but is considered as one of the elements in society. In the context of the topic of religious coercion, the best thing that happened to Christianity is precisely this: secularization, because it has a capacity to right some wrongs. According to Tonči Matulić, the process of secularization, no matter how painful, and in some aspects tragic for the Church and Christianity, enabled the revalorization of the Church that was cleansed and is still being cleansed from identification with the secular instance. Thus unballasted, it can turn to its source—the Gospel message and its original mandate commanded by the Gospel. He concludes: “Accordingly, cultural and social changes should not be considered today solely as threat but rather as a genuine opportunity for internal spiritual renewal of the Church in view of the demand for new evangelization.”<sup>21</sup> Matulić’s argument that secularization brings purification of the Church from secular instance and foster evangelization is a positive shift from the coercive religious heritage in the Croatian context.

But that Croatia is not the only country going through this process is obvious from the example of Czechia which shares the same communist/post-communist history. Tomáš Halík, a Roman Catholic priest, shares some insightful ideas in one of his texts which greatly

<sup>21</sup> Tonči Matulić. “Evangelizacijski izazov moderne kulture i promicanje kulturnog napretka (I).” *Crkva u svijetu*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2006, 205-206.

resemble the situation in Croatia.<sup>22</sup> On the question “What is it like to be a priest in a country where the vast majority of the population does not subscribe to any faith?”, his response was that Christianity, by losing its self-evidence, as a tradition, as a collective sharing of opinions, customs and rituals, “can again become what it was initially and that which it is supposed to be—faith, an act of free will, the call of the Gospels, the inspired search for one’s own path by following Christ.” In response to the same question, Halík then touches on the issue of conversion stating:

Today, when someone in the Czech Republic decides to become a Christian, it is a supremely personal, emancipated act. No one, not even public opinion, forces, praises or supports such a step. A person must swim against the current of conformity, constantly responding to criticism and often self-doubt, which chastens faith and compels him or her to delve deeper and deliver authentic witness.

Accordingly, secularization must be viewed as a positive shift in the religious landscape of Croatia, but what the future precisely holds is hard to predict. With secular winds that blow from the West and EU which force its countries to accept LGBTQ rights, redefinition of marriage, euthanasia, multiculturalism, globalism and religious pluralism in the name of “tolerance,” Croatia is becoming more and more secularized. On the other hand, since attack always create opposition, more and more Croats are discovering their religious roots since they see that secular values lead toward the destruction of humanity. However, going back to their roots, hopefully they will reflect how this story begun in the first place—through religious coercion. In an ideal scenario, the Roman Catholic Church would have to address this issue, and instead of claiming the historical rights on Croats based on religious *coercion* and *sacramentalization*, it should really start working on the evangelization of the Croats. As we have seen, this is happening, but still, there are many things that need to be done in this regard. The biggest obstacle to that, in my opinion, is the sacrament of baptism where babies from the start are immediately claimed as members of the Roman Catholic Church. I know that infant baptism is a firm theological and doctrinal teaching that cannot be changed, but I consider it as a one form of a religious coercion because it prevents a individual from making a personal decision *for* or *against* Christ.

<sup>22</sup>Tomáš Halík. “Mnoho Čechů se za ateisty pokládá vlastně omylem.” (September 2008) <http://halik.cz/cs/tvorba/rozhovory/clanek/99/>.

## Conclusion

In this article, I tried to address the issue of religious coercion in the Croatian context. In order to understand the situation today, we had to analyze how Christianity became a dominant religion in Croatia. Since my argument was that this happened as a result of coercion/violence, we had to also analyze how Christianity was transformed into such *coercive force* and also compare it with the teaching of its founder, Jesus Christ. But Christianity in the form of Roman Catholicism is not solely responsible for this *modus operandi*. Likewise, Protestantism and particularly Islam can be similarly assessed, although their present influence on the Croatian religious map is minor. The influence of Islam on Bosnia and Herzegovina would be the topic worth investigating in this context.

The wheel of history cannot be reversed and we cannot cancel the past. Croatia indeed has Christian (in a Catholic form) roots. Maybe during that period when Croats were becoming Catholics, coercion in religion was not a problem, but today in a time when individualism and freedom of individual conscience is valued, this is problematic. Moreover, such practice is inexcusable from the New Testament perspective. Forcing someone to become Christian and then building the national identity around it is simply wrong in God's sight.

Through coercion, the Roman Catholic Church throughout the centuries achieved quantity but not the quality. This leads me to reiterate the subject matter of this article: religious coercion as part of religious identity. Is it possible? Yes. Is it desirable? No, although it can bring some temporary results. However, today due to secularization, the situation is different. The Roman Catholic Church together with other religious entities has no monopoly on people's identity and religious convictions. Accordingly, this forces the Roman Catholic Church and every other religious entity to reach people through evangelization, service, and sacrifice—which closely resemble the New Testament model. This change is an opportunity for the Christian Church in Croatia to vigorously promote a true spiritual evangelization of a nation that already considers itself nominally Christian.