



## **Religious Legislation in Croatia and the Catholic Church**

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Croatia has just received permission to seek entry to the European Union. The aim is to achieve membership in 2007 along with Romania and Bulgaria.

In 1966 a Protocol between the Yugoslav government and the Vatican had a spill-over effect leading to greater freedom for all religions in Yugoslavia. In 1967 Billy Graham held a three-day rally in Zagreb, the first in any communist country, and 1968 saw the first Croatian translation of the Bible done within the country. (Other translations had been done since the seventeenth century, but none in recent history, and all abroad.)

The census of 2001 revealed that the population of Croatia had actually declined over the previous decade. It had also become more homogeneously Catholic: from 76.6 per cent of the population in 1991 to 88 per cent in 2001. The second largest denomination, the Serbian Orthodox, had declined from 7.6 per cent to 4.4 per cent. All other religions remained as very small minorities.

The Yugoslav law on religion of 1978, passed in socialist times, remained in force in Croatia until 2002. Before the latter law was passed there were four Concordats between Croatia and the Vatican. Many in Croatia regard this as a problem; cynics say that the law of 2002 was framed in such a way as to accommodate the provisions of the Concordats, particularly since the 1990 Constitution ruled that international law takes precedence over national laws and indeed the Constitution itself.

The 1997 Treaty on Cooperation in Education and Culture introduced religious education into the state educational system - and this meant Catholic education. Almost all the minority religions objected. Now most religious denominations are allowed

to provide their own confessional education for their own children. However, the issue of religious education continues to cause dispute. Over the last 18 months all minorities have been objecting to the fact that teaching of Catholic belief and practice has been introduced at kindergarten level; their objections have so far had no effect. The 2002 law confirms religious equality in line with international standards, then, but the fact that Catholicism is the majority faith in Croatia continues to make itself manifest.

After the passing of the law the Croatian state and most non-Roman Catholic religious communities (including two smaller Catholic churches) signed separate agreements. These five agreements regulate specific issues felt to be significant, such as the amount of state subsidy for employees of the various communities, their eligibility for state pensions, state support for the upkeep and renovation of religious objects, access for chaplains to prisons, military and state institutions, special food requirements for Adventists and Muslims, and provision for paid leave for Muslims for religious festivals which are not state holidays.

Most religious communities have been included in these agreements (although some hitherto independent and smaller (Christian) denominations had to join larger denominations because they did not themselves meet the requirement of 500 members). The reaction to the law and agreements is moderately positive. Most non-Roman Catholic signatories confirm that these represent a major step forward and regulate, although imperfectly, relationships which had been unregulated. They also recognise the advance in securing civil rights for their communities and thus greater respect for religious pluralism.

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