

Boris Vezjak

Hell on the left, Heaven on the right

The parliamentary elections in Slovenia were marked by a propaganda episode which aroused first public indignation, then thinly veiled sarcasm. This duality—indignation and ridicule—can itself already be viewed as a symptom worthy of our attention. The news item about the unrestrained enthusiasm of a village priest providing clear instructions to his flock about how to vote made it to the front page: “On Judgment Day, it won’t be fashionable to sit on the left, but on the right, in Heaven.”

The priest then spiced up his claim that voting for the political left is a sin by adding, in a longer modernist commentary, “it’s a matter of our survival in this world and our entry into Heaven.” Thus the priest’s appeal was not just an empty pre-election advertisement. No, he warned his flock that their well-being on Earth and their reward in Heaven are dependent on how they vote. These are two separate assertions: that God prefers the political right, and that believers who vote otherwise will be punished. Since Heaven is the promised eternal kingdom to which our personal faith leads us, the ultimate goal of our religious involvement could be irrevocably jeopardized by making the wrong choice in an election.

It is not by coincidence that the priest’s campaigning was excessive. The Roman Catholic Church has not distanced itself from his views. On the contrary, in some of its comments it has cautiously indicated that while the phrasing was perhaps somewhat awkward, the meaning of the speaker fairly well captured the essence of the matter. And the priest himself did not regret or change anything in his statement: questioned further by journalists, he expressed himself even more forthrightly: “Jesus said he will place some on the left, others on the right. If you want to go to Heaven you must go to the right, if you prefer Hell, then go left.” The final journey of our souls has thus become dependent on a political categorization which as some sociologists note was long ago transcended. Now we suddenly see that it is extremely relevant and maximally fateful cosmologically.

Is there anything wrong with sending left-wingers to Hell? It apparently caused the Slovenian public to barely bat an eye. Sadly. Initial reactions were directed solely at the rejection of obscure church propaganda. There were cautions that, in keeping with the Slovenian constitution, church and state must be kept separate, hence such a statement constitutes inadmissible interference. But no reaction was to be seen regarding the actual content of this at least superficially fanatic appeal – apart from spontaneous ridicule. This is wrong: does it not constitute a form of hate speech? Is not religious fervor causing the stigmatization of people with certain political convictions in such a way as to incite open resistance and animosity?

In Slovenia we have dramatically large conceptual difficulties in defining hate speech. One of the most important political parties in the country has collected some examples of it and posted them on its web page, believing them to be directed against itself. Let's leave aside for the moment the telling fact that this party itself most frequently produces it. Even a fleeting glance at the list suffices to explain the understanding according to which any negative discourse towards its representatives, which may be only critical, or may also be offensive, is classified as hate speech. But even offensive discourse is not necessarily hate speech. In its precise use, it is a criminal offense since it relates to the instigation and incitement of hatred, discrimination or hostility towards an individual which stems from prejudice based on some individual trait such as sexual orientation or identity. In this view we generally have in mind specific criteria as set out in the constitution and law regarding individuals or minorities against whom the hate speech is directed. The criteria applied in defining the promotion and incitement of hatred are race, skin color, ethnicity or nationality, religion, mental or physical disability, also social status, wealth and education. Sometimes another category is added to the ones listed: some countries, for example Croatia, have also included political views as being protected under the law. Article 63 of the Slovenian Constitution refers in general to hate speech, and it is more precisely defined in Article 297 of the Criminal Code. One of its fundamental features is the assumption of equality. Sowing discord and hatred implies that there is a category of people towards whom we behave with hostility, that they are treated in our descriptions and words with inequality and discrimination. So what are we to do, then, about this priest's hate speech? In the debates which followed in the last weeks before the elections, this qualification of it as hate speech was nowhere to be found. But in what way does this association of left-wingers with a place in Hell not fit the description?

Many a person would say that Hell is an imaginary religious category. As a result sending someone to such "places" is entirely harmless. Under the previous regime, religious believers felt persecuted by communist authorities and ideologies, and quite often they were. But is there any tangible difference between the verbal conviction of a communist that religious believers must give up their faith and the verbal conviction of a believer that communists (leftists) belong in Hell? And if so, what is it? Is the incitement to hatred any less present in it even in the case when the persons so treated are grounded in atheism, and for this reason do not take the scenario of Hell as a personal tragedy and can even find it a source of amusement? The next and even stronger argument of opponents of the thesis on hate speech would likely be that no one on the left would feel attacked by this. But I believe that the personal feelings of the person at whom the attack is directed are not and cannot be a necessary condition for the definition of hate speech. Hate speech arises from the intention of

its producer, and the fact that the target does not feel hurt by it does not make it any more acceptable. Will we say that animosity towards homosexuals is less hostile if they do not feel it as such?

In times of political paranoia, such as those in which we now live in Slovenia, the religious demonization of leftists should in no way be surprising. Anticommunism and the rebirth of McCarthyism, i.e. the battle against fictitious communist conspiracies, that we have been experiencing in recent years is now having its logical extension in the religious geography of life after death. If I am right and the priest in his agitprop political insert did indeed use religiously toned hate speech, then two unpleasant conclusions follow. First, what kind of country do we live in if we do not thoroughly condemn hate speech, something we agree on again and again? My answer would be, in a country full of hatred. But that's not all. Is there anything that could be worse? There is. What can one say about the conclusion that we don't even recognize hate speech, let alone try to stop it? That the democratic deficit in the country is even greater. And the first is made possible by the second.

B. Vezjak