

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION IN CROATIA:  
REMARKS ON ITS INFLUENCE ON  
THE LITERARY LANGUAGE

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It is clear that there was a vital and important Protestant Reformation movement in Croatia in the late sixteenth century, but at the same time it is interesting to note that there was little influence from this movement on the development of a unified Croatian literary language. In this way, the Croatian situation is different from that in other countries where the Bible translations, translations of the liturgy and catechism—both Protestant and Counter-Reformation—played a major role in the development of a vernacular-based literary language. (It has been suggested, in fact, that Luther's German translation of the Bible was the beginning of the German literary language and helped pave the way for the unification of the German people.)

Compared to the role which the Reformation played in other South Slavic areas, most notably Slovenia, it is hard to understand why the Protestant movement had such a minor influence on the formation of a literary language for the Croats. In order to understand this, we must understand that there were two important factors which made the Croatian situation different from that in Slovenia and even other lands where Protestantism existed. First, Croatia was divided into three sections with areas under Venetian, Austrian (or Hungarian) and Ottoman political and cultural domination. This fact made the easy and ready acceptance of the Protestant ideas difficult. For the Reformation to have played a major role there would have had to have been a single cultural model and a single source for Protestant ideas. The resistance to the notions of the Reformation, especially in the areas which were under Venetian sway, was also significant.

But significant as these cultural and political factors were, I believe that the more important reasons for the failure of the Reformation to play a role in the development of the literary language is linguistic and it was this which so delayed the formation of a unifying literary language among the Croats until the mid-nineteenth century.

The Croatian area was, and still is, marked by having speakers of all three of the major dialect groups of modern-day Serbocroatian, i.e., čakavian, kajkavian and štokavian. The area along the Littoral and many of the offshore islands were čakavian, with pockets of štokavian speak-



ers, many of them Serbs who had migrated there to escape the Turks—e.g., in the area of Lika, and in Dubrovnik. There were kajkavian speakers in Zagorje around Zagreb and in Slavonia. The Croatian population in Bosnia, just to the east of the mountains, was largely štokavian. (In many ways, this linguistic division also followed the lines of political influence.) Further, there was a strong and important tradition of the use of Church Slavonic using the glagolitic alphabet, especially on the islands, which dated back to the eleventh or twelfth centuries. As time went along, there was increasing influence from the local dialect on the Church Slavonic and the use of Church Slavonic in the liturgy provided the local people with the feeling that their language was that of the Church, giving them the sense that this language was closer to the spoken language which others did not feel with Latin.

The tradition of writing in glagolitic and using Church Slavonic, albeit with čakavian features, was already well established in the fourteenth century, when Charles IV, King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor, invited scholars and scribes from this area to Prague to reintroduce the use of Church Slavonic in his country. The attempt, we know, was unsuccessful, but one can only wonder if there were not the beginnings of the Hussite movement here.

Another aspect of the same question can be found in the already existent traditions of vernacular writing found in Croatia, especially along the coast and in Dubrovnik, by the middle of the sixteenth century. Of particular interest to us here are works like Marko Marulić's *Judita* (1501), written in the author's dialect, as well as Petar Hektorović's *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje* from the last part of the century.

But by far the most serious aspect of the question is that of the lack of mutual intelligibility of the various dialects used for either secular or religious, i.e., Counter-Reformation, purposes. Since both Marulić and Hektorović had written for largely a local audience, the local dialect features of their language had not been a major drawback, but with the Reformation and later the Counter-Reformation, such localized traditions could not be helpful. This is compounded by the fact that the various regions, particularly Zagorje, had a kajkavian dialect which was closer to Slovene and the fact that there were political ties should not be ignored. For this reason, we find that it is in some ways the Counter-Reformation period which is the most striking in the attempts to form a composite language. Returning to the linguistic closeness of the Slovene and Zagorje Croatian areas, we should note that in the preface to his translation of the Bible, Dalmatin writes that he has provided a glossary to enable "a Croat" to understand who does not know certain terms in the text, but it must be noted that the fact that the text of the Bible and the preface are in Slovene, i.e., *kajkavian*, means that the text will not be easily read by either a čakavian or štokavian speaker. (We should



add, however, that Dalmatin's Bible did play an important role in the development of the kajkavian literary language for the Croats.)

We must also note the role which the alphabet played in the attempts to extend the ideas of the Protestant Reformation. Trubar and his followers printed books in glagolitic and cyrillic as well as latin with the particular intent of having cyrillic penetrate into the Ottoman empire to bring about the conversion of both Serbs and Turks; this did not succeed but it did establish at least in part the acceptability of cyrillic for this purpose. Although they attempted to identify the Church Slavonic tradition with glagolitic and cyrillic, they also were not appealing to the Croatian readers who would have been more comfortable with latin script. This was certainly true among those from the Venetian areas where the use of latin had long been established along side glagolitic. (It is interesting, however, to note that later during the Counter-Reformation a number of books were printed in cyrillic, including Divković's translation of Diego Ledesma's catechism.)

Thus, I would suggest there were three major reasons for the lack of a significant role in the formation of a Croatian literary language by the Protestant Reformation: (1) dialect diversity, (2) differences in political and cultural orientation of the various groups of Croats, (3) the differing alphabetic and orthographic traditions in the printed books. Of particular interest concerning the last point is the fact that it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that anything like an agreement was reached on this question. Maretić writing in 1889 demonstrates convincingly the orthographic confusions which reigned earlier. And Murko in his study of the language of Protestant texts demonstrates with numerous examples of minor, but important, differences in various texts why it was hard to find a single model for later acceptance.

Still the question can be asked whether there was some influence on the development of a literary language for the Croats with its beginnings in the Reformation. I have already noted the importance of Dalmatin's translation in the kajkavian tradition. But it is striking that there was little impact in either the čakavian or štokavian areas. Despite the Counter-Reformation texts in štokavian, especially from the Jesuits in Bosnia and catechisms like the *Nauk Karstianski* by Ledesma already mentioned, we can find little. Certainly, this was due to the varying dialect and alphabets in which these books were published.

It is noteworthy that the dialect diversity which existed in the sixteenth century continued until the nineteenth century when the beginnings of a new attempt to form a Croatian literary language are found. And it is noteworthy that reference is not made to the various languages—and translations of the Bible from this era or other works from the Reformation. In the *Literary Accord* signed in Vienna in 1850, which is considered by many to mark the beginning of the modern Ser-



bocroatian literary language, we note that there are reasons for choosing Vuk's "southern dialect", i.e., štokavian, as the basis of the new language, viz., it is closest to Old Church Slavonic, it is the dialect of old Dubrovnik literature, and it is the dialect of the *junačke pesme* ("heroic songs"), but no mention is made of the translations of the Reformation or Counter-Reformation. One can but wonder what effect the existence of a single, generally accepted—and acceptable—translation of the Bible from the Reformation would have had on the development of a literary language for all the Croats.

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