

## **The Macedonian National Prayer Dinner**

by Brad Joseph

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Macedonia held its first ever National Prayer Dinner (NPD) on 23 May 2002, which President Boris Trajkovski initiated as a part of a larger reconciliation policy. Six parliamentarians co-hosted the event who represented all of Macedonia's major political parties. Furthermore, approximately 35 political /civic leaders representing ethnic Albanian Muslim and Macedonian Christian traditions and around 12 guests from all over Europe/US attended the event. The Macedonian participants consisted of government, parliamentarians and other political/civic leaders who had attended similar prayer gatherings in different countries. Besides dinner, the evening's events included prayer, reading from the Quran and Bible and two primary speakers.

For the evening to be successful, the NPD has to overcome long-term and more recent historical obstacles. Last year violence broke out in Macedonia between the majority ethnic Macedonians and the minority ethnic Albanians. According to the ethnic Albanians, violence broke out to secure democratic rights. According to the ethnic Macedonians, violence broke out to support Albanian separatist goals. Though leading parties had signed a peace agreement last August, relations among ethnic groups remain tense, especially due to the scheduled September parliamentary elections, where no party wants to be seen as selling out their respective ethnic group, which makes language issues very sensitive. As with most post-communist societies, many of the governing elite have been educated under a socialist regime that denied religious education and stressed anti-religious sentiments, especially when mixed with politics. Thus, the NPD made possible a process of undermining negative stereotypes about religious traditions.

The NPD's goal is to promote understanding and acceptance. Specifically, President Trajkovski's cabinet set three objectives for the dinner:

1. *An environment of Acceptance*

To provide an environment that promoted acceptance, affirmation and honesty, where friendships could be strengthened across political diversity and past polarisation.

2. *Religious Education*

Very few political leaders are aware of their own declared faith and they certainly have little understanding of different faiths. Specifically, speakers focused on what, in their own faith, contributes toward peace and that Christianity and Islam share the same parentage as children of Abraham. Both religions value the teachings of Jesus and respect for others.

3. *Preventing Cultural Imperialism*

More abstract than the other two objectives, but just as important, is the message that both Christian and Islamic traditions stress a God who transcends all cultural and political divisions. Problems will arise when we deify our own culture. In essence, we attach spiritual significance to our language or other cultural aspects that then leads to ethnic conflict. Thus, our objective was to reduce the spiritual significance, placed on language and other aspects of culture, by appealing to the transcendent nature of God.

### **Lessons Learned**

In spite of a general atmosphere of tension and mistrust, fueled by the recent conflict, the evening proved to be a general success. Specifically, the first two objectives were completely reached. The evening provided an opportunity for friendships to develop across political cleavages. Many who had questioned their colleagues proclaimed faith started to think differently after hearing personal testimonies. The organizers intentionally mixed the seating to prevent people sitting with fellow party members. Furthermore, the six co-hosting parliamentarians had visited similar events in other countries (e.g. Berlin, Rome and Washington DC), and the parliamentarians had already established a working relationship. All of the co-hosts served on the same parliamentary committee.

For many in attendance, it was their first real chance to be educated about

religious traditions. The speakers were all politicians who were chosen because of their integrity and acceptance of NPD objectives. A member of the Norwegian Parliament, who had experience in mediating the Kashmir conflict, was especially well received. The text reading from the Bible and Q'uran were chosen to reinforce similarities between Christianity and Islam.

The third objective, reducing the religious language and culture, proved to be more difficult. During several organizational meetings and up to the evening itself, one issue continually threatened to be insurmountable. That issue was not which religious text would be read or even who would be invited but which language would be spoken, the most challenging element when trying to build consensus. At one stage the co-host threatened to boycott the event due to this very issue. The NPD organizers tried in vain to explain to the parliamentarians, who were co-sponsoring the event, that language should not be an issue at an event intended for reconciliation and understanding. They desperately argued that both Christian and Islamic traditions insist that culture is trivial in the face of God, who has a transcendental message for all of humanity. Fortunately, an agreement, brokered by the President, kept any single political party from boycotting the NPD.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Several suggestions exist on how to maintain the NPD's continuity. Firstly, as similar to other countries, the NPD may be held annually. Secondly, the organizers have encouraged Macedonians to continue visiting similar gatherings in different countries. Any visit by a foreign delegation allows personal relationships to develop that reinforce the goal of understanding and acceptance. Especially in Southeastern Europe, where countries look for recognition and support from Western Europe, western delegations reinforce domestic support for the goals of prayer gatherings. Finally, smaller sub-groups could meet that emerge out of larger gatherings.