

EDITORIAL

WAR BETWEEN RELIGIONS

The Cold War Between Religions

It is ironic as well as tragic that after the liberation from decades of persecution under Communism that affected all churches, that the new freedom be misused for escalation of tensions and conflict between many of the churches. The reasons are many:

1. Ecumenism under the Communist control was monitored and manipulated by the government. In many instances ecumenism did not go beyond pleasantries and protocol. Few genuine theological and institutional interfaith dialogues were possible. Councils of churches and church mergers were brought about by government decrees. Entire churches were dissolved because of political reasons. Hierarchical authoritarianism was promoted by the government in order to simplify supervision. Some churches and church leaders perceived international ecumenical contacts as favoring those domestic church leaders who agreed to cooperate with the government. International ecumenical leaders were often insufficiently aware that there was a perception of being manipulated by the Soviet and Eastern European government propaganda. Bishop László Tökés of the Hungarian Reformed Church in Romania criticized the World Council of Churches for its timidity (see OPREE Vol. 10, No. 5, pp. 29-32) and so did Jakub Trojan, Dean of the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague. Others, for similar reasons feel that there is a need for distance between the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy which was considered to be manipulated by the Communist government and the Evangelical-Baptist Church. The new president of the Evangelical-Baptist Church, Rev. Hrihoriy Kommendant, stated informally at a meeting of the National Council of Churches at Stony Point, New York on February 27, 1992, that it may take twenty years of distancing before they can re-commence ecumenical relations. In jest, he added that if it took the American churches two hundred years before they entered the ecumenical stage, we should understand why it will take Russians at least a century to do so.

2. Now that the churches have freedom to decide their own course, a number of the church leaders and members have repudiated ecumenism. Many church leaders and lay people raised the question of whether they wanted to continue ecumenical cooperation both at home and abroad. The new freedom allows the churches to regain many of their lost properties and to rebuild their structures, some after many years of legal prohibition, which brings a natural preoccupation with institutional rebuilding that leaves little time and predisposition to deal with interfaith matters.

3. In a number of churches and religious organizations, new leaders were elected either as replacement of deceased leaders or as a protest against collaborationist policies. The newly elected leaders often come from among those clergy who were marginalized and persecuted by the Communist governments. Some of them were exiled to remote villages; others spent years in prison; many were denied the right to exercise their clerical

offices. They are perceived by their flock as untainted persons of integrity. That, obviously, is the most important characteristic for the new leadership. But there is a concomitant feature of parochialism that emerged out of their marginalization and suffering. They neither know the other church leaders nor do they trust them. They are more likely to harbor some of the traditional attitudes toward other religions as rivals and threats.

4. The most serious reason for the tensions and in some instances demise of ecumenism is the nationalist conflicts that are now dominating the scene in the states of the former USSR and Yugoslavia and the countries of Romania and Czechoslovakia. In fact, there is no Eastern European country which is not experiencing internal or external national conflict. Since religious and ethnic identity are so closely related, the national conflicts simultaneously bring about religious conflict. Religious leaders have been more able to take advantage of the opportunity to stress such identification than to consider those who belong to another nation or religion in a sisterly or brotherly manner. There is a distinct lack of courage in proclaiming that the enemy has the same God-given dignity and needs to be loved as one's own. A Hungarian church leader admitted to the author that had he declared in his churches that God equally cares for Romanians as for Hungarians he would be immediately lost his credibility. The lesson of forgiveness and caring has been lost amidst the unleashed invectives and hatreds; "God and country" seems again to be the rampant ideology.

5. The Ukraine has been rocked by sometimes violent clashes between the Orthodox and Ukrainian Catholic adherents. Questions of history, legal recognition, property, and membership issues have reached such bitterness that it has affected Orthodox-Catholic relationship in general and has cooled it down to its lowest level since Vatican II. The Orthodox leaders not only in Russia, Ukraine, and Byelorussia but also in Romania interpret the lively interest of the Catholic Church in events in Eastern Europe as signs of Catholic designs upon their territories. In Romania, the Eastern Rite church is unreconciling in its attitude not only toward the Orthodox but also toward the Latin Rite Catholics. The Synod of European Catholic Bishops of November 28-December 4, 1991, on the theme of the re-evangelization of Europe was interpreted by many Orthodox as a rally to proselytize among the Orthodox. The Russian Orthodox are particularly baffled by what seems to them an invasion of Catholic and Protestant proselytizers who sometimes show little regard for the local culture and historical religions. Most of this has been done without ecumenical consultations.

6. Still another conflict is an inter-Orthodox controversy between the Serbian Orthodox Church and Macedonian Orthodox Church as well as strife whether the Orthodox Church in Montenegro should remain under the Patriarchate of Belgrade or seek an autonomous Montenegrin Orthodox Church. The existence of a Macedonian Orthodox Church is not particularly welcomed either by the Bulgarian or the Greek Orthodox Church as Macedonians harbor aspirations toward a greater Macedonian that would encompass parts of Greece and Bulgaria while these two countries both claim Macedonia is theirs.

The Hot War Between Religions

Cold war is preferable to a shooting war. In the shortest of times, the cold war between some religions erupted into a hot one. It is true that these are not classical religious wars where religion is the major or one of the major causes, nevertheless religion plays an important role in these wars. Here ancient national feuds, territorial disputes, suppressed national aspirations due to Communist controls, and the lack of moderating civil institutions (e.g. no tradition of independent peace movements or pacifism) are in the foreground of the conflicts. But religion appears to gladly play a second fiddle to exaggerated national claims by stressing the victim role from which the religio-national unit now seeks to emerge. To point to the most apparent ones:

1. The Armenian-Azeri war. The Armenian-Azeri clashes are ancient; they took place twice in the twentieth century, in 1905 and 1918. After brief independence of both states, the Soviet government gained control of the territory, suppressed national clashes, and decided that the Nagorno-Karabakh area populated by an Armenian majority is to be an autonomous region administered by Azerbaijan. The two nationalities lived in relative harmony until the Great Transformation upon which bloodshed was resumed. Its worst outbreaks came after the two states gained complete independence and climaxed in early March 1992 when hundreds, if not thousands, have been killed in territorial clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenians, who generally have the sympathy of the West as well as significant numbers in the diaspora on account of their suffering in the 1915/1916 massacres in Turkey, seem to have inflicted heavy damages on the Azeri population that is now responding with blinding fury. To quote Rustam Gadzhiev, the leader of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan: "A week ago, I could have forgiven the Armenians. But now, after handling the mutilated corpses of children, I cannot forgive. I consider myself a peaceful man, but after what I have seen, I will kill Armenian children. I will kill any Armenian, no matter what age. I could do it simply. Life has forced us to do this." Surely, there are those on the Armenian side who would repeat such a statement but direct it against the Azeris. The Muslim and Christian religious leadership of the two groups have not intervened forcefully to mediate the conflict. More likely, they are lobbying among their co-religionists elsewhere in the world to gain support and sympathy for the cause of their people.

2. The conflicts in Georgia and Moldavia. Violence, although not on a massive scale has erupted in these two states as well. In Georgia the conflict has intra-Georgian political dimensions, but it also has a Christian-Muslim facet as Christian Georgians fight Muslim minorities. In Moldavia it is the Romanians versus Ukrainians and Russians, and while there is generally no denominational difference, the Romanian Orthodox Church gives enthusiastic support to the annexation of the Romanian parts of Moldavia to Romania while the Russian and Ukrainian churches oppose such aspirations.

3. The civil war in Yugoslavia or former Yugoslavia. The main military activities are taking place in Croatia which has declared independence on June 25, 1991 (along with Slovenia). The major war is between the predominantly Roman Catholic Croats and predominantly Orthodox Serbs. This is complicated by the military activities of the

Yugoslav Army which has in the meantime become for all practical purposes a Serbian Army, with the unregulated military escapades of Serbian and Croatian irregulars (*chetniks* and *ustashes* respectively)--space constrictions do not allow a more detailed and nuanced presentation of the multiplicity of combatants. Some of the combatants interpret the conflict, whether out of conviction or out of malice, as a religious war between Roman Catholicism and Serbian Orthodoxy. It is not surprising that religious buildings of both these churches seem to be a particularly desirable target for the other side (The Roman Catholic Church claims 120 destroyed religious objects by the end of November 1991; one may assume that nearly as many Orthodox religious buildings ended up as casualties as well). There have been a few meetings and calls for peace and reconciliation between the leaders of the two churches, but somehow they are general. The leaders of neither church has called the opposite side their Christian sisters and brothers; such terms are reserved for one's own flock. Since the war has now lasted for months there have been chances for theological reflections. Thus, Dr. Drago Simundza, editor of the Catholic Crkva u svijetu [Church in the World] recognizes the right of Croatian Catholics for self-defense and self-determination but urges restraint and only morally defensible use of force, yet no overt call for reconciliation can be found. On the whole, church leaders of both churches have been very busy appealing for assistance and support from abroad, claiming that genocide is being carried out over their own membership but showing no criticism of the behavior of their own national forces.

4. Another major conflict on the Balkans is between Serbian Orthodox and Muslims. This conflict is two-pronged. One is the conflict between Serbians and Albanians in Kosovo, the Albanians being overwhelmingly Muslim with a Catholic minority, and the other is between Serbians in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Bosnian Muslim who make the largest group of the population in that republic. The Kosovo Albanians have sought autonomy or status of a republic while a referendum in Bosnia, which was boycotted by the Serbs yielded a majority opting for independence. The leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadzic, threatened that such a move means the end of Islam in Yugoslavia, a not-very-veiled threat of genocide of about 3-4 million people. There is an attempt to somehow bring the Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic clergy in Bosnia together by a joint publication, Zajednistvo [Togetherness] and a bi-annual book fair in Sarajevo at which time an inter-faith dialogue would take place, but all of this may come to naught if the outburst of violence after the referendum in early March 1992 is followed up by additional bloodshed.

What Can Religious People in the West Do to Help Ecumenism in the East?

Nothing can be done from the outside to determine the course of ecumenism in any particular locale, but one can aid and support certain trends toward cooperation and dialogue. The first and foremost would be to give an uplifting witness by our own ecumenical cooperation and dialogue.

The second would be to avoid behaving in Eastern Europe as if it was a *terra incognita*. Religious aid and presence in Eastern Europe should be implemented by some degree of consultation, notification, and wherever possible cooperation. Western humanitarian aid

can provide the context in which religious people of the East may meet without constraint and may develop new contacts that can serve in the future as training ground for the new, non-manipulated ecumenism.

The third would be for the more evangelistic religious groups, old and new religions alike, to show respect and concern for other religions that operated in these countries for centuries. It is true that religious leaders in the East will have to learn that religious freedom means that, indeed, any religious group has the right to function on any territory. True religious freedom brings religious pluralism and especially unchurched population may be rightfully contacted and invited, but without coercion or deceit. Such groups should, however, be especially thoughtful of the suffering and victimization produced by Communism and should not exploit this situation by show of glitter, finances, and manipulation. It would probably be desirable to organize mission consultations in the West with participation of both ecumenical and evangelistic mission agencies and persons on how to proceed thoughtfully to evangelize in an area where historically religion was strong but where Communism created a vast ignorance of religion and a decline in religious practice. The established churches in the East may well ask themselves whether people are better off not to be reached by their own religious efforts or being converted to another religious institution.

Fourthly, time will help. The Great Transformation happened all too recently, and it unavoidably brings disorientation, confusion, and even chaos. As time passes, many things will be sorted out, and the various players will gain strength and confidence and will cease to be as threatened by rivalries as they are now. If ecumenism and interreligious dialogue really has something abiding to offer in the history of religions, then it will do it despite regional set-backs. Just as it is likely that many Eastern Europeans will catch up in technology, they will also catch up in ecumenism, leaving behind the cold and hot religious wars of the current scene.

Lastly, ecumenically oriented religious groups must do everything they can to stay neutral if they wish to be reconcilers in these local turmoils. It will not do for the Vatican to only show support and provide relief for the Catholics in Croatia and the World Council of Churches only to visit the churches that are members of the WCC, namely the Serbian Orthodox Church and some of the Protestant Churches, as they have done so far. Christians of the West should also show concern for the well-being of Muslims and not only for fellow-Christians. The exaggerated rhetoric of the danger of Islamic fundamentalism on part some Eastern Europeans needs to be countered by reason and moderation of Christians and Muslims from outside the area. Both relief and contacts must be balanced if we are to be successful peace-makers. Peace-making was a high priority for many of us during the Cold War between the two blocs. It should continue as a high priority in the new situation of numerous cold and hot religious and national wars in Eastern Europe and the independent states of the former Soviet Union.

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