

From Crisis to Post-crisis in Macedonia

by Paul Mojzes

*Paul Mojzes, founding editor of **REE**, is professor of Religious Studies at Rosemont College and co-editor of the **Journal of Ecumenical Studies**. He and Leonard Swidler of the Global Dialogue Institute organized the conference in Skopje. CAREE, of which Mojzes became president again in early 2002, was one of the sponsors.*

For much of the year 2001 Macedonia was in a state of low-level civil war. Ethnic Albanian terrorists and insurgents, many crossing over from Kosovo, put the country on the brink of an all-out war and perhaps disintegration after only a decade of independence. Tense negotiations under strong pressure by Western governments, including the USA, using the stick and carrot approach, yielded at least temporary results: a revised constitution and a shift toward greater pluralism, that has been experienced painfully by the Slavic Macedonian majority. Whether this will work in the long run remains to be seen but the atmosphere in Skopje was definitely more relaxed this Spring. Rather than more coherent terrorist activity only sporadic outbursts of violence have taken place. As a result there are fewer police check-points, yet the police is still visible: our bus returning to Skopje from the Islamic Theological School in a predominantly Albanian suburb was briefly stopped. A convoy of police in armored cars and vans was seen speeding through center city toward the telephone company building which had received a false bomb-threat. But the unrest is no longer exclusively inter-ethnic; dissatisfied workers organized truck barricades which clogged the traffic both in the capital and on the major roads. Their demands were for better pay and benefits. Many are now using the term “post-crisis” to refer to the current situation—certainly an improvement over last year’s gloom

Confidence Building Through Interreligious Dialogue

Unlike Bosnia and Herzegovina, religion did not play as significant a role in distinguishing combatants. Ethnic and linguistic issues and the question of minority

and majority rights are sufficiently prominent so that religion did not surface as a major issue. But last year mosques and churches were being destroyed and vandalized, religious symbols and allegiance were stressed, and the role of Macedonian Orthodoxy for the Slavic population and Islam for the Albanians was being stressed by both religious leaders and the media. Religious leaders raised the question of victimization of their own members but did not condemn violent acts done on behalf of their own people. In June of last year, unable to agree when and where to meet in Macedonia, religious leaders of the five 'major' religions (Macedonian Orthodox, Muslim, Catholic, United Methodist, and Jewish) were invited by leaders of the W.C.C. and the European Council of Churches to meet in Geneva and sign a well-worded declaration which received no airing or follow-up in Macedonia. The World Conference on Religion and Peace brought the Orthodox Archbishop and the Reis-ul-Ulema to New York City, but no meetings took place in Macedonia itself and the tension and suspicion between them continued.

Now this seems to have changed. The device for change was a major Jewish-Christian-Muslim international dialogue conference conducted in and for Macedonia from May 10-14, 2002, under the title "Confidence Building Between Churches and Religious Communities in Macedonia Through Dialogue." The idea emerged several years ago when the President of Macedonia, Boris Trajkovski, a United Methodist licenced lay preacher and lawyer, approached me with the request that the Global Dialogue Institute's founder Leonard Swidler and I organize one of our interreligious Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogues in his country. For such an effort to succeed we needed serious financial backing. The donors were the U.S. Institute of Peace, USAID, the Foundation of Open Society Institute (Soros) of Macedonia, Graf von der Groeben, Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe, Church World Service, and Global Ministries of the Christian Church and the United Church of Christ. Assistance was received from the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation and WCRP.

In order to metaphorically light a fire with wet wood, it was our conviction that we needed to bring to Skopje a fairly large number of international scholars experienced in dialogue. So, over forty scholars of the three Abrahamic faiths gathered from India, Pakistan, Japan, Turkey, Jordan, Morocco, South Africa, Russia, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, France, England, Canada and the USA. The news of such an important gathering did make a strong impact upon the Macedonian religious communities. They organized an interreligious local organizing committee (a novel way of cooperation for them) and with the help of their religious leaders brought about fifty participants to the neutral site of a hotel. For the first time ever, this large number of Christians, Muslims and Jews listened to keynote addresses and responses, discussed, and participated in small group discussions by means of instantaneous translation in five languages! At first they interacted with each other coldly but then more warmly and constructively. The conference did not lack in honesty—at times the expression of frustration between the Orthodox and the Muslims was so explicit that it seemed that it might destroy the effort. But the wisdom of other contributors and the more conciliating words urging cooperation and the careful chairing of sessions resulted in a historic breakthrough in relations, which in the words of one important Muslim “after five centuries of warfare we are finally resorting to dialogue.”

The conference began with a very formal opening. In resplendent regalia, Archbishop Stefan who heads the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Reis-ul-Ulema of the Islamic Community Hafiz Arif Emini, and the Catholic Bishop Joakim Herbut made appropriate welcoming speeches just after President Boris Trajkovski made an unscheduled appearance and delivered a very upbeat brief address. These meetings were recorded on Macedonian TV as was the final closing ceremony at which President Trajkovski again made some adroit remarks about pluralism and equality of all religious communities while acknowledging the historical preeminence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

The first full day of the conference was conducted by international scholars, with keynote addresses given on the Christian side by Yale theologian, Dr.

Miroslav Volf (a native of the former Yugoslavia, like myself, which made a positive impact as we could allay the fear that foreigners came to lecture Macedonians on how to behave), Dr. Reuven Firestone of the Hebrew Union College in L.A., and Dr. Mehmet Aydın of Izmir University in Turkey. On Sunday morning participants attended various worship services. In the afternoon there were five presentations by local religious leaders and academics.

A Handshake

While the hotel venue for most of the activities was a good choice since no one felt that they had to go to the other's turf, the two morning sessions on Monday and Tuesday, proved to be a real break-through. On Monday morning the session took place at the Orthodox Theological School. Not only did one of the Orthodox professors deliver an address that stressed not only Orthodox suffering but also an admission of culpability for some of the tension, but, for the first time ever, the Dean of the Islamic Theological School, Dr. Ismael Bardhi, was invited to speak at the Orthodox Seminary. His speech was so well crafted that the Orthodox Dean, Dr. Jovan Takovski, shook hands with Bardhi in front of about 150 participants, faculty and students, pledging that the two schools will commence cooperation. That handshake was probably the most symbolic moment of the entire conference.

The invitation of the Islamic Dean by the Orthodox resulted in the immediate invitation that the Orthodox Dean deliver a speech at the Islamic School. Not only had they never spoken at each other's school; the Orthodox and Muslims had not even been inside each others' premises. Again the right words were spoken and the assembled faculty and students in the auditorium responded enthusiastically to the speeches and animated conversations took place allowing the warm side of the Balkan temper to break through the suspicious and hostile side of the Balkan paradox.

The Proposals and the Seals of Approval

In the end, three concrete proposals emerged which were carefully enunciated in a brief statement written by a committee of representatives of the five

religious communities. The first urged the creation of a Council for Interreligious Cooperation, unprecedented for Macedonia. The second was that the heads of the religious communities, particularly the Archbishop and the Reis, meet on a quarterly basis even if there is no crisis. The third was that the institutions of theological education find ways to work together on promoting understanding and knowledge of each other's doctrine and practice.

In both the Orthodox and Islamic religious communities the consent of the head of the community is needed for such proposals to be accepted. For this a key figure close to President Trajkovski managed to get a private meeting with the Archbishop and then the next day with the Reis, at which in addition to the representatives of the other religious communities from Macedonia, Leonard Swidler, David Smock of USIP and I participated. It became clear that by now both were ready to go as far as they were ever ready to go and they accepted the proposals and promised to implement them. While it is true that such important decisions in the Macedonian context are made by small but influential groups, I am convinced that it would not have happened had it not been for the presence of a critical mass of international and Macedonian participants, as well as over 100 observers. The conference created the occasion for these brave steps, as well as other initiatives that have yet to be worked out and promoted.

A Reason for Hope?

It is perhaps too soon to ascertain the impact of the conference. After my trips to the Balkans I usually return dispirited. Recently this is changing. Last December a Round Table in Belgrade provided glimpses of a turn around in Serbia. This conference in Macedonia is a source of real hope. The Macedonian participants all seemed to reject the manipulation of religion for the creating of hostility and kept emphasizing that the common belief in God is binding them together for a joint future and that it ought to be reason for tolerance and cooperation. Some were disappointed in the media coverage but I think it was better than it would have been in most places. The interest in the papers that were

delivered and made available in several languages will lead to a book in Macedonian and Albanian (probably under a single cover) to be published this summer and later an English version by the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. It may be premature to make this claim, but the conference may have been a turning point in interreligious relations. A follow up by the organizers and other institutions will be needed to avoid the dissipation of positive energy. One Muslim participant said, “this may be the last chance we have.” I don’t know exactly what he meant but such statements can be a sign of both peril and opportunity. They need outside help to make it an opportunity.