

June 14-19, 2001

Nurturing a Culture of Dialogue - Report of the Visit to Skopje, Macedonia,

Background

by Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler

At the beginning of the Third Millennium one of the most pressing issues is the violence that swirls around religion and politics. When a list of contemporary flashpoints is drawn up, religion sadly frequently figures centrally: Northern Ireland, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Sudan... Often the Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity, Islam - play a major role in these centers of violence: the Middle East, Bosnia, Kosovo, Indonesia, Azerbaijan/Armenia, Nigeria, **and now Macedonia**... This violence centering around religion and politics exploded against the background of the violence of the twentieth century: World War I, World War II, the Cold War, the end of which brought on simultaneously a "*Clash of Civilizations*" and a "*Dialogue of Civilizations*" All three of the Abrahamic religions have played significant roles in the "*Clash of Civilizations*"; they must now play a central role in the "*Dialogue of Civilizations*."

It is the issues of real and/or alleged sources of conflict among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and even more importantly, the real sources of mutual dialogue and cooperation, which have been the focus of the research, reflection, and dialogue by the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars of the *International Scholars Annual Trialogue* (hereafter ISAT - begun in 1977). The ISAT Dialogue 2001 will be held under the patronage of Boris Trajkovski, President of the new nation of Macedonia, who became interested in having such a dialogue in his country when he learned about the previous ISAT Dialogue 2000, held in Jakarta, Indonesia, under the patronage of President Abdurrahman Wahid.

When asked in Skopje, June 14, 2001, in the midst of a newly arisen crisis of inter-ethnic/religious enmity and violence, whether the ISAT Dialogue should be postponed, he responded with a vigorous: "No! Now more than ever!" Hence, the ISAT Dialogue is proposed for October 28-November 4, 2001, the focus of which will be: *Nurturing a Culture of Dialogue: A Journey from Violence to Cooperation*.

Usually one thinks of dialogue in order to prevent violence - and this is no longer quite the case in Macedonia. Violence has already raged in Kosovo, Bosnia and Croatia, and has now begun to burst upon Macedonia. Hence, a burning question now is, how to assist religious leaders to turn religion away from being a factor in interethnic conflicts to being a formidable

means of combating intolerance and nurturing a culture of dialogue which will diffuse tensions and lead to greater cooperation.

President Trajkovski specifically asked outside assistance from ISAT first to showcase the way in which dialogue is conducted, and to draw local religious leaders and people into the dialogue itself. He has done so because, as a Licensed Preacher of the local Evangelical (United) Methodist Church he knows that dialogue and cooperation among the Macedonian religious and ethnic communities - which are nearly congruent - are almost totally absent. Indeed, this was confirmed by all the religious leaders during our June, 2001, visit to Skopje.

In consultation with the leaders of religious communities it was agreed that the main theme of the series of events described below will be “Nurturing the Culture of Dialogue” but since an exact transliteration of this title does not sound good in Macedonian that the title would be “*Gradene na doverba preko dijalog megu verskite konfesija*“ {Building Confidence by Way of Dialogue Between Religious Confessions.]

Review of Activities

Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes, supported by a travel grant by USIP and at the invitation of the President of the Republic of Macedonia, Mr. Boris Trajkovski, visited Skopje from June 14 to 19, 2001. The purpose of the trip was to appraise the need and willingness of the leaders of religious communities and others whom we contacted to play a role in conflict resolution or peace making.

Upon our arrival in Skopje, early afternoon, June 14, Paul called the office of the President of the Republic to indicate our arrival. Almost immediately we met with Mr. Michael Engelking, the representative of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, who came from Sarajevo to help us arrange meetings with the leadership of religious communities with whom WCRP was working previously and with Rev. Kitan Petreski, the local pastor of the Evangelical Methodist Church, in order to plan our meetings. The President’s office called and we were invited at 6:15 p.m. to meet with Mr. Trajkovski. Present at the meeting was also Mr. Trajkovski’s advisor, Mr. Brad Joseph, an American.

Mr. Trajkovski acquainted us with a five-point plan that was being worked on in conjunction with NATO and EU and pointed out that he saw our willingness to convene leaders and scholars of various religious communities from abroad and from Macedonia as part of the

plan which leads to normalization and confidence building after the planned disarmament of the Albanian terrorists. He also suggested that we draw up some concise points of similarities between the major religions for the benefit of common people who are almost entirely uneducated in matters of religious teachings though they consider themselves increasing adherents of religions which they perceive as being in conflict. He thought that we should organize an interreligious conference with the presence of international scholars, as per our initial proposal and suggested late September-early October as the date. This date is too early for us; we propose late October/early November instead. Mr. Trajkovski then appointed Mr. Joseph to accompany us at our meetings and report to him so we could plan further steps with the President's support.

Our first meeting on June 15 was with the Reis-Ul-Ulema of the Muslim Community, Mr. Arif Emini, and the previous Reis-Ul-Ulema of the former Yugoslavia, Mr. Jakub Selimoski. At this meeting and some of the subsequent ones we were accompanied by Mr. Engelking and his assistant, Mr. Bojan Sapunov of the Jewish Community. Our two hosts welcomed our initiative, pointed out the limited contacts with other communities, shared some grievances in regard to the Macedonian Orthodox leaders and appointed Mr. Selimoski as our contact person in organizing future actions.

It should be pointed out that on June 11-13 a group of about 20 religious leaders from Macedonia signed a joint statement in Geneva about their willingness to cooperate in the midst of the present crisis at the invitation and facilitation by the World Council of Churches and European Council of Churches. This act created much greater readiness on part of the religious leadership to support the idea of an increased role of the religious communities in trust building and violence prevention.

In the afternoon we met with Archbishop Stefan of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and a young priest who works in the office. He stated that it is "more than important" to have a conference and related events and that it is not too late to have it in the fall. He stressed the importance of peace and love, but he too itemized some grievances, considering the Muslim religious leadership as being supportive of the Albanian rebellion. He offered to host such a meeting in an Orthodox monastery - but it is our conviction that this would place the Muslims into an awkward position and that we should choose a neutral ground. He appointed his secretary, Rev. Gjoko Georgijevski, to be our contact person for planning future events.

Later that afternoon we met Dr. Olga Murdzeva-Skarik, director of the Balkan Center for Peace Studies of the University of Skopje (we met her again on June 18) and found her also ready to support the process which we explained to her. That would include sponsoring lectures and dialogues at the University. Subsequently, on Sunday, June 17, we met another colleague of her, Prof. Slobodanka Markovska (who had participated several years ago in a semester at Columbia University's Center for Human Rights with emphasis on Religious Liberty - where Paul met her). She likewise indicated her willingness to cooperate with us.

On Saturday morning we met with Bishop Joakim Herbut of the Catholic Church (both Roman and Eastern rite). He expressed his conviction that there is an acute need for the religions to work together because the relations between ethnic and religious groups are currently much more strained - he believes the conflict came from Kosovo and now embitters people. He appointed his secretary, Rev. Marjan Ristov, to work with us on this project.

In the afternoon we met Mr. Saso Klekovski, the head of the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (a large NGO). They had organized the above-mentioned Geneva initiative and statement. He provided some very practical suggestions of how and where to organize our events. He also indicated his readiness to assist us.

On Sunday, June 17, we had further conversations with Rev. Petreski (a friend of Paul's) who promised full support in organizing events unless he comes to the U.S. in the fall for doctoral studies.

In the afternoon we were guests of Todor Calovski, who is a noted poet and director of the Radio/TV Skopje Cultural program, as well as editor of a literary magazine. He committed himself to promote our events in a variety of media, building it up over the weeks prior to the events.

Our last day, June 18, was particularly busy. At 8:30 a.m. we met one of the most impressive and promising figures for our idea, Rev. Jovan Takovski, the newly appointed Dean of the Orthodox Theological School and a younger professor Rev. Aco Girevski. Rev. Takovski studied in Paris and has participated at ecumenical meetings and wrote about interreligious cooperation in an Orthodox journal. He indicated his full support and we think he is likely to play a key intellectual role in the project.

Then we met with Ms. Vilma Venkovska-Milchev who works for an NGO, Search for Common Grounds, and later in the day we met with her boss, a Philadelphian, Eran Frankel,

whom Paul knew many years ago. Eran indicated some pitfalls of certain approaches. This organization probably has the best and most balanced access to Albanian and Macedonian media and supports multicultural Albanian-Macedonian education at the kindergarten and high school level - it is the NGO that has supported the multicultural education projects which Prof. Violeta Petroska-Beska of the University of Skopje successfully launched. They offered to facilitate post-conference processes for the continuation of religious conflict resolution (some of them are fed up with the term but they all think it is needed and possible).

We had organized a meeting with Ms. Merita Kuli, an ethnic Albanian woman working for Catholic Relief Service, but she sent instead Mr. Sasha Veljanov, a co-worker as she got sick. Mr. Veljanov pointed out some of the educational and peace-making activities of CRS, which point to the possibility of cooperation with them.

In the afternoon we received a message from Mr. Joseph that President Trajkovski is expecting us again. So we rushed to his office. Again he received us warmly, asked for a report of what we accomplished, indicated his strong support, appointed Mr. Joseph to work with us in the future toward the realization of our plans. He indicated he will contact United States Institute of Peace to express his hope that we may be supported in this endeavor by USIP. What impressed us is that he found time for us amid constant meetings with Messers George Robertson, Javier Solana, press conferences, and meetings with representatives of all four parties in order to forge some agreements demanded by Western governments. On top of that there were constant expectation that the rebellion may spread into Skopje (we were driven to the outskirts of Arachinovo and found some Macedonian refugees from Arachinovo pretty hostile to our presence - so, we cleared out. We did encounter some undisguised anti-Americanism in several conversations).

Observations and Conclusions

We observed, unsurprisingly, from conversations, watching local TV, and reading the local press that Macedonia is in a deep crisis. People are gripped by fear, full of hostility and hatred, deeply suspicious of Western, especially American intentions, mostly blaming the war on NATO, imported from Kosovo, etc. Regretfully we did not have a chance to meet many ethnic Albanians.

The religious communities have had preciously few contacts except for the WCC and Macedonian Council of International Cooperation's facilitated joint statement. The religious leaders supported our initiative. In their expression of support it was evident that they are very sensitive to the interpretation that they need to be taught how to conduct dialogue - they are very proud of their ancient civilization and claim that there was century-old interethnic and intercultural tolerance. It is evident that we will need to keep them informed of the progress of our plans. We did not promise them firmly that we will be able to realize our proposal and told them honestly that it hinges on our ability to receive funding in the USA. Mr. Trajkovski believes that many concurrent confidence or trust building measures are needed, and that the religious communities could be particularly helpful.

In our conversations with religious leaders we noted some neuralgic points which lead us to change some of the items in our earlier draft of the proposal. The most obvious was that no attempt should be made to deliberately schedule any overview of the past (the past may emerge in the encounters whether we want it or not, but certainly such discussion should not be a separate item on the agenda). It is clear that the focus ought to be on the future, namely how they could jointly or separately work toward avoiding the cataclysm of a civil war and how they can undertake steps to influence the population of the country toward greater tolerance so they can at least get back to at first an uneasy coexistence and then positive interactions. We also became more cognizant of the need to make an impact upon educational institutions rather than just religious communities. Likewise, we feel that we would have no success in convening important Macedonian religious leaders unless such occasion was related to the meeting of religious scholars, as per our proposal.

We noted that people are increasingly turning to religion (not necessarily for narrowly religious purposes). We noted, for instance, that the people who came in the middle of the day to the Macedonian Orthodox Cathedral were mostly young. (One of them told us that she did not think that religious people should run for office as all politicians are crooks--a sentiment shared sometimes in this country also). The Orthodox Theological School now has 300 students of whom 40 per cent are women - several years ago there were only a handful of women and considerably fewer students. In asking for explanation regarding the interest of the young Macedonians in their own church some young people stated that they were "shamed" by the greater adherence of young Albanians to their Muslim tradition.

Can interreligious dialogue stop the destructive processes? Our conclusion is no, certainly not by itself. Does religion play a factor in what is clearly an ethnic, political, and social conflict? The answer to that is yes. Though not to the degree as it was in Bosnia, religion is a present factor for distrust and expression of hostility. However, if religious leaders and people in Macedonia were to see a model unlike what they believe to be the case in Asia and Europe and witness important scholars of traditionally hostile religions being able to make a case effectively for the need and value of cooperating to prevent violence and if that somehow gets disseminated and further developed, then it will do its modest contribution toward rejection of the well entrenched belief that somehow religions condone and advocate violence. There are, indeed, clergy--Muslim and Christian (Judaism not playing a significant part)--in Macedonia who advocate war and destruction of the other. Such voices need to be countered by those who witness to the peacemaking character of the religious teachings, despite a shabby historical record in doing so. We believe that supporting those voices has a chance, along with other internal and external factors, to tip the scale toward normalization and tolerance.