

REPLY TO GEERD VAN DARTEL AND JURE KRISTO

The exchange of criticisms is an important avenue for a more complete understanding of truth. My article, "The Role of the Religious Communities in the War in the Former Yugoslavia," was meant to share my perspective on the complex and tragic situation and my conviction that institutional religious communities there have done more to contribute to the present mutual extermination than to bring about reconciliation. By publishing these letters to the editors and my own response to them I hope that readers will be able either to correct their views should they feel that I misled them or to make a decision which of these interpretations is sounder. I also hope that additional readers will join this discussion in order to enlarge our scope of discernment.

REPLY TO VAN DARTEL:

I appreciate the tone of your letter and the explanations of the genesis of your study of Serbian Orthodox theology. Since your letter was written I had a chance to see a touching video of the ravages of the war in Slavonia (Croatia) in which you had a major role, entitled "Why? Why?". I agree that it is a pity that we do not agree but I think the reason is that you view the conflict on the basis of your personal experiences primarily in Croatia while I have made very deliberate efforts to explore it also from the perspective of the other sides in the conflict which resulted in my unwillingness to identify myself too closely with any of the perspectives. Generally this results in displeasure about my interpretation by most people who are engaged in this conflict.

To make a distinction between people like Turcinovic, Bajsic, and Sagi-Bunic and some other Roman Catholic thinkers is not at all a ploy to set one segment of the Catholic community against another but simply to point out that not all are like-minded or equally nationalistic. I believe this to be true about the Orthodox and the Catholic (as it is true more universally). In my previous contacts with Croatian Catholics I have gotten a much greater appreciation of the insights which some of these thinkers and leaders have than others.

You are quite correct in pointing out that my criticism of the religious institutions is far more harsh than yours. For one thing it is more inclusive than your criticism is because I think it is mandatory to use the very same criteria in evaluating the role of one religious community or leadership as another. Recently I have returned from a three week trip to Serbia, Macedonia, Croatia, and Slovenia in which I carried on an in-depth conversation with a very large number of prelates, clergy, political leaders, intellectuals, and common people of many nationalities, religious, and orientations. The trip resulted in minor adjustments of my views and in a wealth of new insights but I find no need for major re-assessment of what I wrote last spring. I think that those who know more about this facet of the war should highlight the self-sacrifice and benevolence of relief-effort and the sometimes equitable assistance given to wounded people of all sides. But too frequently I found only the ability to see the suffering of one's own people and the lack of pain and concern for the fears and sufferings of the enemy.

Finally, let me say that I did not intend to question your and Dr. Anne Herbst's lack of desire to work toward improved Catholic-Orthodox ecumenical relationships but I do think that you judged one church harder than others. You may be right that the lack of mutual charity between religious communities is not a Balkan monopoly, but gratefully there are places where such relations are much better and there are not many places where such relations are worse. Indeed, you are right to note that my criticism could be extended to such organizations as the World Council of Churches, the Council of European Churches and, if I may add, the Conference of European Catholic Bishops or World Alliance of Muslim States, as well as the CE and UN. The problem stems, I think, from going and visiting only one side in the conflict and feeling solidarity only for this one side. Since the Serbian Orthodox Church is member of the WCC their statements reflect the compassion that the members of the fact-finding teams had for the suffering they saw there. When Catholic bishops visit Croatia or predominantly Croatian parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina they end up solidarizing with their suffering. The Muslims show concern for the Muslims. This is natural but there is a need to go much beyond that. One must muster the integrity and moral courage to protest equally vigorously when 'one's own side' does something dastardly as one protested when the other side did. I think the U.S. Bishops Conference provided such a ballanced approach in some of their most recent letters to Croat and Muslim authorities about the new waves of "ethnic cleansing."

I do hope that you will feel free to send some of your thoughtful observations to this periodical for publication.

REPLY TO JURE KRISTO:

Our friendship of many years makes this interchange that much more painful. Indeed, we do not see eye to eye on a lot of issues, including the issue which is under discussion. I am not elated that you resort to name-calling rather than simply stating areas of disagreement and supporting your own contetions. You seem to be a victim of a tenor of confrontation so frequently encountered in intellectual and media circles of the states of the former Yugoslavia thus being no surprise that it is hard to improve relations among those who disagree when arguments are used that generate more heat than light. It is important that our readers see that.

The strength of your reply is that it is unambiguous. Your position that the Serbian Orthodox Church contributed and contributes to a war of aggression is clear and you state no qualifications. It is also clear that not once did I encounter in your writing a single self-critical note about Croatia or the Catholic Church, though you do claim that you are. Claiming something is not the same as doing it.

It is not my intention of saying that the Catholic Church is doing everything wrong. Cardinal Franjo Kuharic and others have issued many touching appeals to their constituency not to seek revenge but to forgive--just as Patriarch Paul did. The latter you fail to note in your writings. The leadership of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia, just as, regretfully, the other religious leaders, seem to lack that which one would hope religious leaders to be able to do better than the general population or political leaders,

namely to "see the signs of the times." Instead of looking beyond the immediate problems and anticipating the long range impact and seeing the comprehensive needs not only of their own diocese to comprehend the more universal picture, they tend to be only pastors of their own flock. I suppose I grieve that there are too many priests and too few prophets. A priest is mostly concerned for the institutional well-being of the people for whom one has responsibility; a prophet is called to tell the truth and reserve the harshest criticism to one's own people. I have met some such prophets both among the Serbian Orthodox and the Croatian Roman Catholics, but they are, indeed, a lone cry in the wilderness.

I resent the implication that I somehow did not adequately acknowledge the use of your articles. The very reason that they were as yet unpublished led me not to cite verbatim with page numbers specifically because I did not want to hang my argument on some unfortunate turn of phrase which you might have corrected in a later version. But your material was not for private use only nor is the nature of the material such that you would for any reason wish not to own up to what you wrote. Hence I explicitly mentioned you prominently, though I had no intention to highlight you as some sort of exception, because your views in these papers reflected authentically what I know you deeply believe from my other knowledge of you. You probably have a cause for unhappiness in regard the way in which I used the material, namely by turning your argument from its head to its feet (or vice versa) but indeed, I thought you provided ample evidence for a political involvement of the Croatian Catholic leadership. That you were focusing only on its role in the fight against communism but I saw its negative by-product the spread of national chauvinism says more about a one track-mind preoccupied with anti-communism while at the same time not seeing the other destructive forces lurking in the demise of communism.

You are also oversimplifying my views in order to ridicule them. A statement of my conviction "that war is the worst form of human interaction" is not a self-evident platitude, at least not in the Balkans. You know too well the slogans "better war than a pact" or Izetbegovic's statement that war is preferable to the Muslims than what the Serbs and Croats have offered them for a peace settlement at Geneva. Contrary to your assertion, I did state my premise rather clearly. Equally oversimplifying is the statement "He blames Croats and the Catholic Church there for the dissolution of Croatia." Yes I do but not only them and not even mostly them. Nor am I diminishing the role of the Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church in that process as you accuses me, though again, I do not think they alone are to be blamed, as one often hears and as Kristo tended to do in the two articles of his.

I suppose that the greatest surprise in your reply is your continued criticism of my statement first published in The Christian Century that Croats and Muslims are as capable of atrocities as Serbs are. At the time when I wrote this I had history and the personal knowledge of the area for my source. More recently--and both prior and after Kristo's letter of July 23--we have pictorial evidence of such atrocities for the whole world to see. How can you still object rather than express shock and regret. I did not content that the atrocities are quantitatively the same. I don't think they are, although the final count will

take again a long time to come and in the meantime people on all sides of the conflict will abuse the figures for propaganda advantages and for the fuelling of future wars. What pains me is that Jure Kristo shows little or no ethical sensibility that the war crimes of one group do not justify the war crimes committed by one's own side. The sad thing is that he is not the only one showing this weakness; my recent trip confirmed that it is an extremely widespread phenomenon (dare I call it sin?).

I am tempted to answer the other criticisms, e. g. my use of the notion of tribalism (for which I can show a host of references in the publications from the territory of the former Yugoslavia) but this may be both petty and exhaust the patience of the reader. It is my hope that both have been helpful to those who wish to understand the role of religion in this war and had less opportunities for first hand observation may find useful insights in our exchange while others who know the situation well may decide to send in their own written contributions.

Paul Mojzes