

**REPORT ON THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
RECONCILIATION IN BOSNIA, DUBROVNIK, CROATIA,
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by Paul Mojzes

*Dr. Paul Mojzes, founding editor of **REE**, is professor of Religious Studies at Rosemont College and the president of CAREE.*

Three institutes, the Erasmus Institute and the Joan B Kroq Institute for International Peace Studies, both located at the University of Notre Dame, and the Institut fuer Theologie und Frieden, Barsbuettel (near Hamburg), Germany organized the International Conference on Reconciliation in Bosnia. It was funded by the Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung in Osnabrueck. The sessions took place at the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik with slightly over 30 participants. Most of the participants were from Bosnia and Herzegovina, six each from Germany and the US, and one each from Croatia, Turkey, Italy (a Russian Orthodox priest), and Scotland. Most of the preparation and organization of the conference were by Thomas Bremer of the Catholic Theological School in Muenster, Heinz-Gerhard Justenhoven of the Institut fuer Theologie und Frieden, and I.

By design we brought together a group of people who are activists in religiously inspired NGOs whose mission is interreligious cooperation, with academics who look at reconciliation also from a theological/theoretical perspective. The intention was for the professors to hear reports from the activists about their aims, accomplishments, and difficulties in various localities in Bosnia & Herzegovina and Croatia, thereby helping the academicians to understand the practical challenges of the work of reconciliation. The professors shared their theoretical approaches to the issue of reconciliation that seemed to be helpful to the activists as a theological underpinning of their work. There did not seem to be any tension in regard to the two approaches; to the contrary, there seemed to be mutual appreciation for the contributions of each approach.

The activist groups that were represented included the Abraham/Ibrahim group (initiated by a former GDR Protestant pastor), the Centar za religijski

dijalog [with which CAREE member Dr. David Steele cooperates on a regular basis], the Zajedno [Together] Center for Intercultural/Interreligious Cooperation, all three from Sarajevo, the Pax Christi centers in Banja Luka and Zenica, the Omladinski centar [Youth Center - secular] in Jajce, and Centar za mir [Center for Peace] from Osijek, Croatia. The vast majority of the theologians were Roman Catholic (from Bosnia, Germany, and the USA). In addition there were two Islamic professors (from Sarajevo and Turkey), one Russian Orthodox theologian (from Italy), and two Protestants (from Scotland and I). Regretfully, the two Serbian Orthodox theologians from Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina did not show up.

The reports from Bosnia indicate that there are serious problems of communication between ethnoreligious groups even today. Many people are still unable to satisfy their basic human rights. Most people are now free to talk about what happened and there are many open wounds but most people choose to be quiet.

Professor Mato Zovkic from Sarajevo expressed the opinion that the United Nations forces may need to stay in Bosnia for twenty-five years; if they withdrew now the war would start again. Return of the refugees (to Bosnia) is rare and fraught with dangers for the returnees. Some have concluded that ethnic cleansing was actually successful in separating the ethnoreligious groups and that a minority of extremist priests/religious leaders supported ethnically pure areas. Almost all agreed that the war was fought for ethnic reasons but that the religious leaders felt the need to protect their ethnic group and had therefore contributed to the commencement and development of the war.

Professor Adnan Silajdzic of the Islamic Theological School in Sarajevo urged that specialists be engaged to study objectively the role that religion has in the formation of national identities. There was consensus with my observation that religious literacy was and remains very low and that this also contributes to the ability of extremists to lure the religious communities into confrontation rather than reconciliation. I also expressed my conviction that the creation of three parallel ethnoreligious educational systems in which each religious group is teaching its

own catechism - which has already taken place - while perhaps improving the religious literacy rate, is de facto a continuation of the war by educational means because the three communities now have no common experiences and rather divergent ways of teaching history, literature, religion, and even art and music. It is hard to envision how a common sense of ownership of the country can emerge in the future under such conditions.

Peace-keeping in Bosnia & Herzegovina has, for the time being, been successful, but peace-making by the major religions is barely happening. The NGO groups are attempting to address human rights issues, carry out social service projects, provide workshops for conflict resolution and peace-making, and publish periodical and other literature. On the positive side a remarkable initiative was undertaken by a Pax Christi group from Maribor and Ljubljana (Slovenia) who came to repair a Serbian Orthodox church. On the other hand, one of the groups, Abraham/Ibrahim, experienced a surprising but unsuccessful attempt to be taken over by Wahabi-oriented Muslims.

The theologians, such as Dr.Silajdzic, stressed the importance of formal dialogues in order to overcome the pre-modern traditionalism of the population of Bosnia & Herzegovina. Many pointed out the importance of religious hierarchies for the formal dialogue and the resistance to any cooperation that some members of the hierarchies have displayed, but, that some of them have become more cooperative with time. The Franciscan priest, Marko Orsolc stated that reconciliation, however, is our common religious essence and if we don't work on reconciliation we don't serve our purpose. Professor Mahmut Aydin from Turkey stated that we all have a need for a new theology of other religions that will no longer claim - as the old theology did - that only our own religion is right.

Without being able to summarize what all participants stated, it was clear that their consensus was that Bosnia is no longer, but needs to return to the paradigm that it is the place where all major religions of the Balkan have neighborly contact with one another rather than to be a place of hostile borders.

Outside of the conference I had two disquieting experiences. A couple from Bosnia who settled in Dubrovnik told me that their son who is in elementary school came home one day and said, “I hate Jews.” There being practically no Jews in the area and having tolerant parents, they asked him why, and the answer was that in religion class they were told that Jews killed Jesus.

On Sunday I attended mass at the church of St. Ignatius Loyola. The church was packed with worshipers and the lectionary was the text about Peter asking Jesus how many times his followers are to forgive others and the text of the servant who was forgiven by the master of an enormous debt but prosecuted a debtor who owed him a little. It would seem a perfect opportunity to proclaim the need for reconciliation. The priest, whose sermon otherwise was not bad, chose to use the opportunity to lambast the Jews for holding an “eye for an eye” position instead of following the Christian command to forgive. But, he said, “that is their problem.” Then he said, it does not say anywhere in the Bible that they [Croat Christians] are to forgive Chinese (?), Turks(!), and Serbs(!), as the text urges forgiveness to neighbors and friends. The reader may find such exegesis humorous but in the context of a post-war possibility for healing in Croatia, it is unlikely that the parishioners will be encouraged to practice forgiveness outside the narrow confines of their ethnic community.

What gives reason for hope is that at least on the surface many people seem in practice to want to go beyond the wounds of war and that the Croatian press has become very explicit in its criticism of narrow nationalist exclusivism still evidenced in many areas of life. If the religious communities do not become agents of tolerance and receptiveness for the “other,” I believe that God will find others to do the job!