

TENSIONS WITHIN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN THE BALKANS

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Peter Kuzmič's comments about the tensions in Sarajevo is an excellent lead-in to what I was going to say. But I was going to locate the tensions at an even earlier place. There isn't only tension between the Christian churches and between Christians and non-Christians. There are serious tensions *within* religious communities in the Balkans and elsewhere.

I'll take the example of Macedonia, because that's the country where I've been more recently engaged at a very intense level. There are really five major religious communities; two larger ones and all the other ones are very minor. Within the Orthodox Church, there's a huge schism over the relationship between the Macedonian Orthodox Church with the Serbian Orthodox Church. One of the Macedonian bishops had actually accepted the sovereignty of the Patriarch in Belgrade, whereas the Macedonian Orthodox Church does not, and it led to his imprisonment and other complications. It's a very serious tension between the Orthodox communities.

In my own Methodist community, the five or six ordained ministers often did not get along – frequently badmouthed each other, barely spoke to each other. A symptom of that is that the bishop who resides in Switzerland had to appoint an Austrian district superintendent in order to make it possible for them to work together more effectively.

In the Muslim community it is worse. Some people think that the Muslims are all like-minded because they are all from the same ethnic group. One of the most interesting persons whom I met in Skopje is a man named Ismail Bardhi, who was the dean of the Islamic Theological School. He is outgoing, very open-minded, has a degree from the Islamic Theological School in Sarajevo, and obtained his doctorate in Ankara, Turkey. He speaks Macedonian, Turkish, Arabic, English, Serbo-Croatian, and his native Albanian. He is not an ethnic nationalist but is open-minded and was a professor as well as dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies. But in the last several years there has been a huge upheaval in the Albanian Muslim community, a tremendous power struggle with several groups trying to seize power. They are not just fighting by words, but actually using weapons and violence.

For instance, about a year ago or so at a faculty meeting of the theological school several masked men burst in with machine guns. They basically said, “we are going to decide who is going to be the next leader of the Islamic community.” They started shooting at the ceiling, giving notice that they could lower their aim if they wanted to. So after that, needless to say, all were very intimidated. Just a few days ago I got an e-mail from Dr. Bardhi. There had been four *Reis-ul-ulemas* (presiding leaders) of the Islamic Community of Macedonia in the period of one year. Every few months a new person is mentioned, and every one of them tries to remove all the opposition and put his people into position. So for instance, they appointed a young man who had been educated in Egypt, presumably with very strong Islamist tendencies, to be a professor at the Islamic Theological School. Ismail complained and wrote a letter to the *Reis* wondering why the faculty had not even been consulted before appointing a new professor. Thereupon he got a letter removing him from his position as dean, but also firing him from the faculty, along with the other three professors who had doctorates. So right now the Islamic faculty has only one person who has a doctorate in Islamic theology. It is easy to imagine that when such upheavals take place *within* a community, it is not likely that there will be much better relations *between* religions.

However, there are also some places in which we may be able to help the situation, particularly when we are invited. I completely agree with Gerry Shenk’s list of the no’s and the yes’s. There are certainly good reasons why we as Americans are not suited as reconcilers. The point is this, we did go to serve in Macedonia on the invitation of the late President Boris Trajkovski, who actually embodied an unusual situation of a Methodist becoming the President of Macedonia – much to the disgruntlement of the Orthodox population in Macedonia. He was probably elected with significant votes from the Muslim community. I don’t see how he could have been elected otherwise. But in any case, they were on the verge of a civil war between the ethnic Albanian and Macedonian populations. He had heard that religious dialogue has the *potential* of bringing people to the same table to talk to each other. Further he had told me that people in his country do not know what dialogue is; it’s not a concept that was known to them. Would we come and help at least to explain how it’s done?

With the financial help of the United States Institute of Peace, my colleague Leonard Swidler and I went to explore the possibility of doing something there, but we didn’t want to go and teach them something. We wanted to find out, first of all, whether there is sufficient

interest on their part to explore dialogue as a way of confidence building? Our new colleagues in Macedonia gave us a very hesitant yes, an *extremely* cautious yes, which actually sounded more like a no than a yes. Since Boris Trajkovski was so eager to see something happen, we took that very faint signal as a yes signal, and decided to try to build upon it. The way we thought we would be working on it is to have a very large Jewish-Christian-Muslim international dialogue in Skopje to model what can be done by people who are committed to dialogue. At first they were rather dubious about it, but when they saw that we were bringing a contingent of about 40 important people from around the world who were going to have an international conference in Skopje, they also came. Attendance was actually rather good – about 200 people came. Of course, when Trajkovski found out that it was really happening, he came in his capacity as the president of the country. The press, of course, is always present when the president of a country speaks somewhere. So we had a magnificent opening ceremony – with President Trajkovski, the Orthodox hierarchs in these wonderful flowing robes, the *Reis* had a wonderful hat and flowing robes. Only the Methodists didn't have any special garb. The interesting thing was that this opening ceremony made a visual impact, so that we were able to talk about dialogue, even though a couple of times it seemed that people were so angry with each other that they were going to walk out. But they didn't, they stayed.

The impact of that dialogue came in the follow-up. We decided, of course, not to have only one conference and then go home. One has to have responsibility to stick with it, to be more persistent, because no one is going to be successful with just one conference or one workshop. So Leonard Swidler and I and some other people (among them Jim Payton, Gerry Shenk) came along. Actually whenever we went to Macedonia Leonard and I made sure that those who came with us represented one of the five religious communities: we always had an American-Jewish person with us, a Muslim (sometimes from Turkey, sometimes from the U.S.), a Catholic, a Protestant, and an Orthodox. In the meantime, the two deans of the Orthodox and Islamic Theological Schools became sold on the idea, so they would invite us to speak at their seminaries – not only to other professors but also to students. It wasn't always easy for us. Most of you know Leonid Kishkovsky, one of the most outstanding Orthodox ecumenists, who had to try to argue against some Orthodox students at the Orthodox Theological faculty that it is appropriate for Orthodox to be ecumenically involved, because “ecumenism” is nowadays a dirty word among many of the Orthodox. It is

interesting just how reluctant they were to accept Kishkovsky's otherwise very persuasive arguments on behalf of Orthodox ecumenism.

Here is the longer term result of that process. For a while I thought that maybe we will not succeed in the end. Several times when we left Macedonia, we were sure the only reason they met together was because we came. By the way, culturally speaking they are very eager to be pleasant and good hosts, so they were not going to embarrass themselves, for instance, by not showing up. They showed up when we came, but some of them with whom we corresponded also told us that when we were gone, they were not meeting. Of course, one cannot depend on a foreign guest to be a meeting facilitator forever. Interestingly enough, the last time we were there in November 2005, we went not sure that there would be much of a future in it. Suddenly, however, at the meeting it turned out that they had been meeting since we were there. They never told us, never wrote us an e-mail saying "hey, by the way, we met." They had found some concerns they had in common. One of them was an impending law on religious communities. They had a really serious common interest to see a law favorable to all of them being passed. They also discovered that the government is much more willing to listen to them when all five of them are in agreement than if one of them is coming representing the Orthodox position, another the Muslim interest, or the Jewish interest. So the government actually listened to their proposal and lo and behold, they got a law which at least the Council for Interreligious Cooperation is satisfied with.

Then there was another thing that seemed to be of common interest: the return of properties that had been confiscated by the communists. Here too they found out that if they go together to the government with their joint plea, they're likely to get a better answer than when they went separately. And lastly, there was a possibility of introducing religious education in the schools. That was a little more divisive issue, because the Jews, Methodists, and Catholics are such small communities that it is not really possible to do religious education effectively in public schools, whereas the Muslims and Orthodox had a real chance of making a splash. The three small minorities realized that their positive role would be as a buffer between the two larger communities. At the same time, they saw an advantage in being publicly recognized. The other two communities are so big that they don't really need the smaller communities. They could totally bypass them at no loss to themselves. Again there was a win-win situation, and they cooperated on that score as well.

Finally what happened in November that was so encouraging is that they took upon

themselves to organize three workshops. No longer meeting just in Skopje – everything usually happened in the capital city, and it was always pretty much the same people – so it was ecumenism from the top down, or really only ecumenism at the top with some observers. Now somebody proposed three workshops in the provinces. One would be at Ohrid with the Orthodox Church organizing that workshop. This was with American money, by the way. Another workshop was at Tetovo which the Muslim community would organize (Tetovo is something like 80-90% Muslim). The last workshop took place in Strumitsa, where there are more minorities, namely Catholics and Methodists, who said “let us organize one together.” The Jews tagged along to all of them (there are only about 60 Jews in all of Macedonia! Not quite, but the few of them are really capable ones who really know how to put the fire under the others). The good thing was that we had not gone to any of these workshops; they were organized all by themselves. I have pictorial evidence as they had taken a lot pictures at these workshops. These seemed to be precious moments of meeting; of people who either did not know each other or greatly distrusted each other sitting at the same table, talking to each other, getting to know each other. And the significant part of that was that these were clergy persons from these areas that would walk by each other, maybe sometimes know who the other person was because they had ecclesiastical clothing on, but they didn't *know* each other. Here they had a chance to get to know each other, to meet each other at the human level.

I don't know if this is going to have a lasting effect or not. It is a real encouragement to us. We had a little money left over. I proposed that instead of Leonard and I going over one more time, we offer it to them for a fourth workshop in Prilep or Bitola where there have been some conflicts between Muslims and Orthodox. The Council eagerly accepted, enthusiastically responded that this seems to be something that is working for them. That meeting also took place. Will it have a long-range effect or not? We don't know, but I feel it's a good way of starting something – letting them take the lead, being there as a facilitator, and not telling them that they have to do this or that. They do welcome ideas, interestingly enough. They're not allergic to getting ideas from the outside, but they don't like to be told what to do. As several Macedonians clearly told us, “We have been Christians for 2000 years; St. Paul came to Macedonia.” Fine, I'm okay with that! But this is the thing: we Americans as a newly baked nation often come to them, an ancient civilization, and try to tell them how they ought to behave, and that certainly is inappropriate. I think there are ways of actually serving people in times of tensions. It doesn't mean that those tensions will go away. It could

very well happen, like in Sarajevo, that for a few years it works, then after awhile the tensions become so strong that the community is split apart again. And who knows whether Bosnia will have another war. We hope it will not happen, but it is not excluded.

DISCUSSION

Audience [Peter Kuzmič]: Just a mini-testimonial: You did contribute *significantly* through this process to de-escalating the tensions in Macedonia.

A: There are cultures in which confrontations are much more visible than in other cultures. I think in many cultures confrontation is dealt with in a different way – more subterranean – whereas in some cultures it's all hanging out. Like Luka and Angela Ilić were saying, this is not just the case in Macedonia, it is like that in Serbia and other places. Regretfully that is the situation. Needless to say, people cannot get along with each other even *within* relatively small communities. Why would we expect people in an entire country, who are from such different cultures, to get along?

Q: Do you think there are elements of the Macedonian experience that are transferable to other situations? What was helpful?

A: From what I understand, there are a number of people, like David Steele, who have transferred the experience. David has spent a lot of time in Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, and Macedonia. I assume he is still fairly active, but cannot judge to what degree his effort to serve was successful or not. My hope is that it could work. But the people have to be ready. Here's what happened just before Leonard Swidler and I went to Skopje. There was an attempt by the World Council on Religion and Peace to try to import the Bosnian model of interreligious cooperation to Macedonia. They actually brought the Bosnian members of their Interreligious Council to Skopje – these were a Roman Catholic cardinal, the Reis-ul Ulema of Bosnia, an Orthodox bishop, and a very capable Jewish lawyer, Jacob Finci, who is really a fabulous interreligious leader. They brought cameras, television, and made publicity about it. But the Macedonians pulled back and said, “no, no, no, no, not in public.” They were afraid of the kind of negative feedback they would get from their own community for appearing to fraternize with the enemy, sitting at the same table, being friendly, and sharing a meal. They needed to first meet very low-key.

One of the first and biggest issues was always *where* they would meet. The Orthodox, being the largest community, were always willing to invite the others to their

premises. That was fine, but the other communities said that now it's our turn. However, the Orthodox would not go to the Muslim community. Then they thought if they met in a Catholic or Methodist place, which are much more low-key and less ostentatious, but that also was nixed. Finally we resolved it by meeting in a hotel. Sometimes you have to find a neutral place where everybody can come and nobody can say "we are host, you are the guest." Sometimes you have to pay attention to these little things to resolve the problem.

My sense is that it can be done. Finances are *always* an issue, because often the reason why people are not doing much more by themselves is because they don't have the means. They are poor. I suppose if there's a will there's a way, but there is always this financial question.

Q: One of the fascinating things that arose out of the 2002 conference was that the two faculties – the Orthodox and Islamic – sent students and faculty back and forth to visit each others' classes, and they would have people from the other faculty speak, and some interesting things did happen. But I assume that after what's happened with Ismail Bardhi, that kind of thing has been sidelined.

A: Yes, probably. They also did some dialogues on the radio, so that the larger public could also listen in.

Q: But it is a sobering account overall. If Trajkovski would have lost the next election perhaps the dean might have lost his tenure. It makes you vulnerable, as even the successes can turn around.

A: Trajkovski's popularity rating was lower than Bush's, something like 12%, because he negotiated, much under the pressure of the U.S. administration, the so-called "Ohrid Agreement," whereby they gave more constitutional rights to minorities. The Albanian language would be an official language in those areas where Albanian minorities are largely present. Many ethnic Macedonians were utterly disgusted with that constitutional change. After Trajkovski died (almost like JFK), legislation that was at first very suspect, suddenly with a person being raised to martyr status, became acceptable. He saved Macedonia. So people who hated his guts the day before suddenly started to shed tears.

Q: It is interesting that his wife, Vilma, is now being invited to speak at various reconciliation gatherings, at political and other forums.

A: She's a magnificent person. She started a new foundation that is dedicated to the implementation of ideas and aspirations of her husband.