

OHRID 2010: THE SECOND WORLD CONFERENCE ON INTER-RELIGIOUS AND INTER-CIVILIZATION DIALOGUE

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On May 6-8, 2010, in the beautiful and historic city of Ohrid, a UNESCO world heritage site, the Republic of Macedonia hosted the Second World Conference on Inter-Religious and Inter-Civilization Dialogue. The conference theme was “Religion and Culture: Substantial Relation among Nations.” About 200 participants attended, personally invited by letter from the Minister of Culture, Elizabeta Kanchevska-Milevska. Attendees came from thirty-three countries around the world – North America and Africa, Western Europe and Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East all sent representatives. Representatives of the Council of Europe, UNESCO, and the Vatican also participated. Attendees included Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, a Shinto priest, and people with no religious profession. Representatives of several non-governmental organizations participated, as well.

The conference fit well with the UN’s declaration of 2010 as “The International Year for Rapprochement of Cultures.” The conference will assure that Macedonia maintains its place in the foreground of international endeavors to promote peaceful coexistence and respect among the world’s religions, nations, and cultures. This event was sponsored by the Republic of Macedonia’s Ministry of Culture, in cooperation with the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups. UNESCO provided main funding support.

The conference was significant, both for Macedonia and for the international community. To appreciate the event appropriately, it will be beneficial to view it against the history that led up to it, including comparison with preceding Macedonian initiatives in this regard. This will help identify particular strengths and weaknesses of this second conference, with a view to the projected third world conference, planned for 2012 or 2013.

Legacy from President Boris Trajkovski

The late president of the Republic of Macedonia, Boris Trajkovski, led the way among Macedonians in seeking to promote this dialogue. In the years since his untimely death in a plane crash in 2004, leaders of the Macedonian government have continued to emphasize the importance of international dialogue between religious communities and civilizations. The recent conference pursues further what President Trajkovski had so effectively begun and carried forward.

In February 2000 President Trajkovski telephoned Paul Mojzes in Indonesia, the site of that year’s International Scholars Annual Trialogue [ISAT]. These trialogues had been established by the Global Dialogue Institute (headed by Professors Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes) and had been held in various venues around the world for most of the preceding quarter-century. The purpose of the trialogues is to bring together Muslims, Christians, and Jews (and at times representatives of other religions) to interact with each other in open and respectful conversation – in order to promote understanding, respect, and peace. President Trajkovski asked Professor

Mojzes to arrange to hold the next meeting in Macedonia – which was at the time teetering on the edge of civil war, with ethno-religious factors playing significant roles in the growing tensions. Professor Mojzes agreed to the proposal.

ISAT 2002

The original intention was to hold the Trialogue in Skopje, the capital city of Macedonia, in November 2001, but violence between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians (mostly Muslims and Orthodox Christians, respectively) intensified enough during the summer of 2001 that it became necessary to postpone the conference. Even so, during this time, Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler, as the leaders of ISAT, visited Macedonia in June and November of 2001, to make preparations for the conference. They met with all the religious leaders (Orthodox, Muslim, Catholic, Methodist, Jewish) as well as President Trajkovski representatives of several NGOs, and other key persons. Plans eventually came together well, and the Trialogue was held on May 10-14, 2002, in Skopje. The theme settled on for the Trialogue was “Confidence Building Among the Churches and Religious Communities in Macedonia through Dialogue.”

More than forty international scholars from countries such as Japan, India, Pakistan, Jordan, Russia, Turkey, Israel, Germany, Belgium, England, Morocco, Canada, and the United States participated.¹ In addition, nearly fifty local religious scholars and leaders from all the religious communities in Macedonia were officially appointed to participate. A local planning committee made up of representatives of all five of the major religious communities had been erected and had met several times to collaborate with ISAT in organizing the Trialogue. It was noteworthy that such collaborative planning meetings and large appointment of Trialogue participants, especially by the two largest religious communities, the Orthodox Christians and the Muslims, were totally unprecedented in living memory or historical record. Major funding for the conference was received from the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Fund for Open Society Macedonia, as well as a number of other religious and governmental agencies.

ISAT 2002 was formally opened with greetings from President Trajkovski (who was there in person) and presentations by the heads of the religious communities in Macedonia. Beyond these, several papers were presented by respected international scholars of one of the Abrahamic religions, followed by responses from representatives of the other two – which led into extensive discussion from the floor. In addition, conferees were divided up into small group sections to facilitate discussion of various issues related to peaceful interaction among religious and civilizational groups. All the sessions of the conference offered opportunity for discussion of the topics broached by papers. Meals together and coffee breaks allowed the participants to engage in abundant personal interaction. It was obvious that ISAT 2002 had been organized by academics and religious leaders: it had a definitely religious-scholarly “feel” to it, with the presentation of papers, questions from the floor, and smaller group meetings which assured significant interaction and ongoing discussion.

While the conference was not, as such, sponsored by the government of the Republic of Macedonia, the conference nonetheless met the hopes and served the purposes of President Trajkovski. What began as an undeniably edgy meeting – understandably, given the extreme tension that had issued into and resulted from ethno-religious fighting and its concomitant displacement of peoples within Macedonia – eventually turned into considerate, peaceful

¹ Several members of CAREE (Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe, which produces this journal) participated in the trialogue: Paul Mojzes (then president of CAREE), Jim Payton (at the time, executive secretary), Gerald Shenk, Michael Jones, and David Baer.

collaboration for mutual respect and co-existence in Macedonia. This was tangibly expressed in the agreement on the part of the leaders of the five major religious bodies in Macedonia to meet regularly to continue the goals of the conference and to form The Council for Interreligious Cooperation with the consent of the main religious leaders of the country.

Significantly, in its concluding session, ISAT 2002 adopted a declaration which became a press release: the declaration summarized what had taken place at the conference and highlighted the accomplishments and decisions, specifically affirming at the end that “all religions, besides their differences, have some things in common that bring us together. Therefore, we recommend that all activities that disturb the confidence should be rejected.” As they departed, many participants noted the increased hope and cautious optimism that something significant had been initiated with this conference. President Trajkovski’s continued efforts, followed up by the Macedonian government and its ministries after his death in 2004, assured that the momentum would not be lost.

Regional Forum: Dialogue Among Civilizations, 2003

President Trajkovski followed up the successful dialogue with another initiative the following summer. The conference was conceptualized as being a meeting of political, cultural, and religious leaders from many parts of the world but with an emphasis of Southeastern Europe. He invited the heads of state of Hungary, Bulgaria, Albania, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro, to join him as Macedonia’s President in Ohrid, Macedonia, for “Dialogue among Civilizations,” an event held August 28-29, 2003. This event took place with the support of the United Nations and as one of the Republic of Macedonia’s contributions to the UNESCO Decade for Dialogue among Civilizations.

President Trajkovski thus hoped to build on the successful endeavors to that point within Macedonia itself. While not all tensions between Macedonian citizens of ethnic Albanian and ethnic Macedonian heritage had disappeared, there had been notable improvement – not least because of the collaboration among the leaders of the religious communities, living up to their promises at ISAT 2002, who sought to find ways to undercut those tensions and promote mutual respect and cooperation. President Trajkovski hoped that encouraging similar dialogue among religions and cultures in the rest of the Balkans – which had certainly faced considerable tension in these regards in the more distant past and in the most recent decades – would lead also to similar positive outcomes and initiatives. The event was successful, in that it raised hope and optimism that progress could be made in these regards within the larger Balkan peninsula. One of the most remarkable features were that all of the Presidents of participating countries emphasized in their speeches the importance of dialogue and several noted that had they engaged in dialogue they may have been able to avoid the worst violence of the wars of disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. President Trajkovski also had individual private meetings with each of the Presidents and it may well be that the most important achievements of the conference were the one’s achieved in private rather than public speeches.

The First World Conference: Ohrid, 2007

Prior to his untimely death, President Trajkovski’s indicated his intention to continue and expand these types of intercivilizational, intercultural, and interreligious dialogues wishing to expand on the leaders’ regional forum and have the Republic of Macedonia host a conference to carry these initiatives onto the world stage. Trajkovski’s dream was lead to fruition as the First World Conference on Inter-Religious and Inter-Civilization Dialogue was organized on October

26-28, 2007, in Ohrid, Macedonia. The theme of the conference was “Contribution of Religion and Culture to Peace, Mutual Respect and Co-Existence.”

The conference was sponsored by the government of the Republic of Macedonia, with financial and logistical assistance from UNESCO. Participants recognized the high level of interest in and support for the conference when their invitation letters came from the Honorable Nikola Gruevski, Prime Minister of the Republic of Macedonia. Some 300 representatives attended: about 200 were foreign participants from some fifty countries,² with the other third of the participants from Macedonia. Almost all of the participants were scholars, religious leaders, or political figures.

As in ISAT 2002, the 2007 world conference began with addresses from Macedonian leaders. The Honorable Mr. Gruevski brought a profoundly insightful address, nuanced in its approach to religious, intellectual, political, and civilizational issues. He was followed by presentations from the Orthodox, Muslim, Roman Catholic, Methodist, and Jewish leaders of Macedonia. A number of religious communities were represented by a significant number of top religious leaders, such as five Roman Catholic Cardinals and a number of Eastern Orthodox Archbishops and Bishops. Several major addresses followed, not all dealing directly with the theme of the conference or staying within their allocated time. There was some time for questions from the floor and dialogue. Meals and coffee breaks allowed time for personal interaction with other delegates.

Participants had been invited to propose papers for presentation. Only some of those were accepted, with a specific time limit of no more than twenty minutes for their presentation: a few of these were presented in plenary sessions, but most were given in the several smaller sections (designated “panel discussions”) identified in the program. Each panel discussion had a basic focus around which the various papers revolved. These panel discussions allowed many more participants to be involved in discussion and interaction on the papers and related topics as questions arose. While the opportunities for discussion were more limited than had been the case in ISAT 2002, the brief times devoted to questions after the plenary presentations plus the opportunities afforded by the panel discussions allowed attendees genuinely to participate.

With this, it was clear that government figures as well as academics and religious leaders had worked together to plan the 2007 world conference. Paper presentations in plenary sessions were followed by questions from the floor, and the interaction in the smaller panel sessions allowed for free interchange among the participants. Macedonian government leaders played a pronounced role throughout the conference (and with that, security precautions were understandably abundant and unmistakable). The government of the Republic of Macedonia had drawn attention to the conference by billboards announcing the event on display around the country and inviting the media to report on the conference. A large number of newspaper, television, and radio journalists were present and reported extensively on the conference, with many participants interviewed for their comments and views.

The event closed with the adoption of a declaration. A draft of such a statement was written prior to the conference and was proposed to the participants and extensively discussed by them. Revisions from the floor were proposed, some of which were adopted, as participants sought to define and refine the outcomes of the discussions and interaction which had taken place. While the declaration predictably included foundational considerations regarding religions, cultures, and dialogue, much of the specific wording reflected the themes and concerns that had been discussed during the conference. Some organizers and participants have a much greater appreciation of the

² Four members of CAREE were privileged to attend: Rev. Priscilla Felisky-Whitehead (former president), Paul Mojzes (former president), Ines Murzaku (member of the executive), and Jim Payton (president since 2006).

value, function, and importance of such declarations than others; in eastern European culture such declarations are an expected end result of each conference. As the meeting came to a close, participants were challenged not just to let this conference be an event in their past, but to ask themselves what they could do in their present and in the near future to promote inter-religious and inter-civilizational dialogue in their home countries. As the conference closed, there was a palpable sense of excitement and satisfaction at having participated in a genuinely significant event of world importance, in which authentic dialogue and rapprochement had been pursued, and from which each participant could go on to contribute by endeavors at home.

By the following year (2008), the Macedonian government had produced a large, handsome, glossy, hard-cover book of the conference proceedings, with all the papers which had been presented and many photographs of the conference, in five languages – Macedonian, Albanian, English, French, and Russian. This was available from the Macedonian government, and a copy was sent to each presenter. The Republic of Macedonia also prepared a thirty-minute documentary of the conference, including excerpts from presentations and interviews with numerous participants. (At the second World Conference, discussed below, copies of this volume and of the DVD documentary were offered gratis to all participants.)

The Second World Conference: Ohrid, 2010

The second World Conference on Inter-Religious and Inter-Civilization Dialogue met in Ohrid May 6-8, 2010. The Macedonian government again proved to be gracious and thoughtful hosts. DVDs on Ohrid were given to participants, along with the volume and documentary from the first world conference; meals were sumptuous; and the conference venue was striking – it was held in two hotels situated on the shores of Lake Ohrid, so the event was enveloped in the magnificent natural beauty of the area.

This conference was billed as a follow-up to Ohrid, 2007, and it had much in common with the preceding conference – but there were some striking differences, as well. Gathered at Ohrid, the participants³ heard presentations from Macedonian government officials (including the Minister of Culture, the Prime Minister, and the President), as well as addresses from the leaders of the five religious communities in Macedonia (as recognized in the constitution of the Republic of Macedonia). Scholars and other religious leaders from around the world presented papers. Meals and breaks allowed for personal interaction with other participants.

But this conference was organized by political figures, with too little influence on the final format from the respected members of the international planning committee. There was no time allotted for discussion in any session whatsoever, i.e. no time for any formal give-and-take. The conference had a “pre-packaged” feel to it. That was communicated (probably unintentionally) when participants looked closely at the schedule: the opening reception was preceded by a meeting of the international planning committee to review the “Draft Declaration” which the conference was to adopt in its final session. No papers had yet been presented, and no discussion had arisen, but the declaration was “ready to go.” When it was presented to participants at the end of the conference, modifications suggested by those who were still present were allowed only reluctantly, even grudgingly, by the chairperson of the session.

It came as a surprise, also, to most delegates to discover from the schedule they were given upon registration that the conference would last one day less than had originally been announced (May 6-8, rather than May 6-9). This occasioned some confusion for travel arrangements. (Our Macedonian hosts graciously worked to accommodate these dislocations, though.)

³ The only CAREE members who participated in this second conference were Paul Mojzes and James R. Payton.

As had been the case with the conference in 2007, registrants had received an invitation to submit possible paper topics. Many did: indeed, some eighty papers were accepted for presentation – with the proviso that each paper must not exceed eight minutes in length as presented. (As any academic will recognize, that is a tall order; even so, all these participants dutifully prepared their condensed presentations for the conference.) As in 2007, these papers would be in addition to those made at the opening of the conference by Macedonian government and religious dignitaries.

But it was clear that no such limitation in length had been prescribed for those dignitaries: the opening session, in which all of them were scheduled to (and did) speak, ran nearly ninety minutes overtime. A brief coffee break allowed some organizational scrambling – after which it was announced that the papers to be presented in the rest of the sessions of the conference would have to be no more than four minutes long. Condensed papers ensued immediately, rattling along after each other, with no time for discussion. This allowed only brief glimpses of what would probably have been many intriguing papers – which, in other circumstances, would have made for stimulating discussion and interaction among the conference participants. Beyond this grievous limitation, there were no smaller group sessions where discussion could take place: everything occurred in plenaries until the penultimate session, which offered the nearly 200 registrants two options instead of just one. Little actual interaction among the participants was possible, except for what could be had during meals and the few coffee breaks. This proved valuable, of course, in a limited degree; but the lack of actual engagement with others on the questions raised prohibited the development of any significant sense of being actually involved in an important event.

Participants and others can look forward to the promised volume of 2010 conference proceedings, which will contain the complete text of all the submitted papers (plus pictures from the conference, presumably); when that book arrives, they will be able to read the entire texts of the papers. But that will allow no opportunity collectively to engage in discussion. The volume will be a welcome outcome of the conference; the lack of engagement with papers was a notable drawback to it.

It will also be important to note in which languages the promised conference proceedings will be produced. The 2007 one appeared in five languages – Macedonian, Albanian, English, French, and Russian. This will be important in view of a surprising, and particularly disappointing, change in approach to the 2010 conference.

The genesis of this most recent conference lay in the endeavors to overcome the separation between Macedonian citizens of Albanian and Macedonian ethnic heritages. In ISAT 2002 and Ohrid 2007, translation was available into both the native languages (Macedonian and Albanian), as well as those of attendees from other parts of the world. This sought to enfold participants from both the major constituencies within Macedonia as full participants – which was certainly the intention of President Trajkovski as the whole initiative got underway and had marked Ohrid 2007, as well. However, at Ohrid 2010 no translation into Albanian was available. No matter how well the translation provisions served the participants from other regions of the world, they did not accommodate that of the Albanian registrants – who, after all, represent a considerable proportion (estimated somewhere between 22% and 28%) of Macedonia's total population. This was an egregious – and inexplicable – failure on the part of the government planners, since this conference was intended to serve, not only the international community but the peoples of their own nation. Newspaper reports appearing soon after the opening of Ohrid 2010 noted that most of the Albanian-speaking registrants had left the conference after its opening session, because of this neglect.

It was difficult to get participants to “buy into” this event, since so little interaction was possible and so much seemed stage-managed. With that, it is not surprising that the declaration which was adopted offered nothing distinctive of this conference as it actually unfolded. The participants had much to be grateful for – beautiful surroundings, delicious meals, the opportunity to make personal contacts – but they were not likely to head to their home countries “pumped up” by the conference and what it had achieved.

Plans are underway for a third world conference. It is to be hoped that the planning will correct some of the undeniable limitations of Ohrid 2010 and return to the stronger patterns of ISAT 2002 and Ohrid 2007. Hopefully the future conferences will rectify the problems of the second conference because the world needs stimulation to engage in inter-religious and inter-civilization dialogue; it needs the vision of President Boris Trajkovski.