

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE BALKANS: SUMMARY AND COMMENT

James R. Payton, Jr.

James R. Payton, Jr., is Professor of History at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, Canada. He has contributed frequently to REE and also serves as executive secretary of CAREE.

In this paper, I will summarize several reports about achievements by United Nations organizations and the Kosovo Force [hereafter KFOR] in the Balkans during 2001. My summary will also include, from the same period, other reports about areas of concern in which these organizations have shown scant interest, despite pleas from leaders and representatives of the peoples in the region. The latter resulted in an unusual letter from the head of the Keston Institute in which he reflected on some of the failures, a letter from which I will present extended portions. Following that, I will add some reflections of my own on the issue, as a historian of Eastern Europe.

What UN organizations and KFOR have been doing

In *The Year in Review: UN Peace Operations in 2001—Voices from the Field* (December 2001),¹ one finds, amidst reports from around the globe, five articles about activities in Europe. Of those, three focus on Balkan territories – significantly, all three of them lands of the former Yugoslavia. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the main UN organization has worked with local law enforcement agencies to conduct more than 200 raids on bars and brothels where women from elsewhere in Eastern Europe have been forced into the sex trade. Some 350 girls have been repatriated to their homelands; cases against those who ran the establishments are being prosecuted; and some convictions have led to fines and prison sentences (pp. 12-13).

¹Produced by the United Nations Department of Public Information, December 2001.

Secondly, both in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Kosovo, UN organizations are helping to train police forces in procedures that respect the rule of law (rather than brute force and intimidation) and in following these procedures (often unfamiliar to the people the police thus serve). Good beginnings have been made, but resentment against the resultant slower pace of investigation and against enforcement of hitherto neglected regulations led, during a one-week period in July 2001, to seventeen cases of violence (either actual or threatened) against the police forces in Kosovo (pp. 11, 15-16). Much work remains to be done.

A third significant endeavor was the reconstruction of the bridge in Mitrovica, Kosovo. The project manager was required by UN agencies to employ an equal number of Serbs and Albanians. He did so, and with fewer complications than he and others had feared, the crew of sixty-one found ways to work together and rebuild the bridge. None of those involved claim that the year-long collaboration resolved the simmering tensions in Mitrovica, but it certainly turned down the temperature. Indeed, the fact that the two groups worked together to achieve a mutual accomplishment, important to both sides, is a promising harbinger of a possibly peaceful shared future (pp. 14-15).

A report on other UN activities in the region is found in the UN publication, *Refugees* (Vol. 3, No. 124 [2001]), in the treatment, "The Balkans: What Next?"² The article noted the ongoing efforts of UN agencies to help refugees: endeavors during the war years of the 1990s have now given way to coordination with democratically-elected regimes in Croatia and in Yugoslavia. By the end of December 2001, repatriation efforts had resulted in the return of some 730,000 Bosnians to their homes, and of nearly all the 880,000 Kosovars who had fled the province (p. 8). Stories on specific initiatives, showing both problems and successes, brought the data to life (pp. 11-15, 18-21, and 22-25). The article also pointed out, though, that tensions had surfaced in Macedonia during the first half of 2001, when internal strife led to nearly full-blown insurrection, and about 150,000

²*Refugees* is published under the auspices of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees; the article is on pp. 4-25.

civilians had become internal refugees (p. 8) As well, KFOR has been providing protection and maintaining an uneasy peace in Kosovo.

Clearly, there is much to commend in the work of western organizations seeking to promote reconciliation and justice in the region. However, accolades are not the only appropriate response, for positive involvement is not the whole story.

What UN organizations and KFOR have not been doing

One of the tasks of the Keston Institute is to report on violations of religious freedoms in the lands of the former Communist empire. Several times a week, ***Keston News Service*** [hereafter ***KNS***] issues e-mail updates on recent developments in which religious freedoms appear to have been threatened or violated.³ Between November 2001 and February 2002, several communiques have focused on Kosovo or Macedonia. In most of them, western agencies involved in the region have come under criticism for their inactivity or delay in response.

On November 26, 2001, ***Keston News Service*** reported that some 200 mosques had been destroyed in the 15 months before the end of the NATO bombing in June 1999, but that little assistance had been offered to Kosovar Muslims to rebuild their religious communities. On the same day, Keston reported a Serbian Orthodox assessment that the international authorities in Kosovo showed no interest whatsoever in the religious aspirations, needs, and heritages of the peoples they are to protect (***KNS*** 26 Nov. 2001).

The next day, Keston reported that some 108 Serbian Orthodox monasteries or churches in Kosovo had been vandalized or destroyed since the arrival of KFOR, despite promises of protection. Appeals from Yugoslavia to UNESCO (the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) for preservation of historic sites (such as the fourteenth-century Decani Monastery) had been delayed due to bureaucratic red tape (***KNS*** 27 Nov. 2001). A further unexplained fire in a

³These reports are distributed via e-mail. Further information on the Keston Institute, including how to receive these e-mail reports, is available at the website: <http://www.keston.org>.

Serbian Orthodox church in Mitrovica on February 16, 2002, has recently heightened tensions (*KNS* 20 Feb. 2002).

With all this, both Muslim and Orthodox leaders pointed out that maintaining religious communities was virtually impossible (*KNS*, 26 & 28 Nov. 2001). Little if anything was being done by western organizations to enhance or assure the survival or restoration of those religious communities. Indeed, in October, one Serbian Orthodox source declared that “religion is ‘totally disregarded’ by the international authorities in Kosovo” (as reported *KNS* 26 Nov. 2001).

Keston has also noted that in Macedonia religious sites have come under attack, without comment or response from western sources. On December 11, Keston reported that at least 30 churches, mosques, and monasteries in Macedonia had been destroyed in the autumn of 2001. The most recent target had been on December 9, when a fourteenth-century Macedonian Orthodox church was seriously damaged by arson. In apparent retaliation, the next day a fire damaged a fifteenth-century mosque in Bitola (*KNS* 11 Dec. 2001).

Such attacks on religious sites amount to efforts at ethnic cleansing (*KNS* 27 Nov. 2001). However, none of these has attracted attention, not to mention outrage, in the West. That prompted a remarkable letter from the director of the Keston Institute.

Response from the Director of the Keston Institute

Keston communiques rarely offer personal appeals (except, of course, occasional ones for financial support). Consequently, when the director of the Keston Institute, Lawrence Uzzell, made such a direct address to Keston’s readership on February 6, 2002, it was noteworthy. More significant yet, his letter focuses on what Keston had observed of western failures to act for justice in the Balkans. Bluntly forthright, the letter is worth quoting extensively:

Dear Friends of Keston,

In the immediate aftermath of the 11 September attacks, many (including myself) expressed fears that the west would demonise the Islamic world as a

whole. For the most part these fears have not come to pass. If anything, western journalists and government leaders have gone too far in the opposite direction, downplaying facts that might undermine the newly fashionable portrayal of Islam as a religion of peace and tolerance.

Other religions and cultures have not been so fortunate. Sometimes an ethnic or religious group is unlucky enough to be cast as a permanent villain. The evils which it has committed are known to all, but the evils which it has suffered somehow remain invisible. All of its members, including those who were passive onlookers or even active dissidents, are punished for the deeds of their most sinful brethren. Such seems to be the fate of Serbian Orthodox Christians. Keston Institute is committed to freedom of conscience for all bona fide religious believers, even the untrendy. That is why *Keston News Service* correspondents Geraldine Fagan and Branko Bjelajac recently visited Kosovo, the haunted province where Orthodox Serbs and Muslim Albanians have lived and fought for centuries. Three years ago NATO subjected the Serbs to Europe's most massive aerial bombings since World War II, in order to end their vicious persecution of the Kosovo Albanians. Formally, Kosovo remains a province of Serbia, but real power is now divided between United Nations administrators, a NATO peacekeeping force, and the formerly persecuted Albanians. The Serbs have now found themselves at the receiving end of 'ethnic cleansing' at the hands of the Albanians; Kosovo's Serb population has shrunk to a tiny fraction of its pre-war size. As a practical matter, the Serbs are virtually powerless except in a few small enclaves. Since the war ended in mid-1999, Albanian terrorists have physically destroyed or vandalised more than a hundred Serbian Orthodox church buildings – often by dynamiting them. Not one of these terrorists has been tried or even arrested. . . .

Ask yourself what the western reaction would be if a hundred Baptist churches or Roman Catholic convents, or a hundred synagogues, had been

savaged in just one small province of one country within a mere two-year period. The uproar in the news media, even the secular media, would of course be enormous – like the 1990s furor over charges of a racist conspiracy to burn black churches in America. On the terror campaign against the Serbs' churches, by contrast, the mainstream English-speaking media have for the most part remained silent. United Nations officials in Kosovo do not even seem to be fully aware of the anti-Orthodox terrorism. One UN official told Keston that he was unaware of any destruction of religious sites since the NATO forces' arrival in 1999: "It was all in the immediate aftermath of the war," he said. In fact, an Orthodox chapel in a cemetery 20 miles south of Kosovo's capital of Pristina was destroyed by three dynamite explosions in early November of 2001. A few days earlier, Serbs visiting the Orthodox cemetery in Pristina itself found that most of the graves there had been destroyed or desecrated (*KNS* 12 Nov. 2001).

Any competent scholar will tell you that religious conflict has been a crucial ingredient of Balkan history for the last millennium. Keston found, however, that the Pristina office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe had only one publication in its possession on the subject of religious life in Kosovo (*KNS* 26 Nov. 2001). I wonder if it would be possible to find any OSCE office anywhere in Europe with only one publication on its bookshelves about, say, freedom of the press? Needless to say, the OSCE has published no official report of its own on the subject. Fr Sava Janjic of the Decani Monastery told Keston that even though the Serbian Orthodox Church is "the only institution left representing the Serb people in Kosovo," religion had been "totally disregarded" by the international authorities (*KNS* 27 Nov. 2001). . . . A May 2001 UN report on the protection or restoration of sites important for Kosovo's cultural heritage clearly tilted against Orthodox churches and monasteries, even though such buildings constitute the majority of the province's cultural monuments older than the sixteenth century. A Hungarian adviser to the

OSCE told Keston that he had contacted officials of UNESCO (the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in the spring of 2000 about the protection of religious sites, but that “they were very, very uninterested.”

Mr Uzzell’s comments do not focus exclusively on the Serbian Orthodox, however. He proceeds to point out that the Kosovar Muslims’ religious concerns have also been neglected:

The UN authorities also seem tone-deaf to the religious needs of Kosovo’s Muslim majority. Few of the hundreds of mosques destroyed by the Serbs before the NATO bombing have been restored or replaced. Even these construction projects are being distorted by donors from states such as Saudi Arabia, dominated by the Wahhabi branch of Islam which prefers architectural austerity. Albanian mosques, by contrast, favour the more elaborate, ornate style influenced by the Turkish tradition. Saudi-funded builders have actually tried to tear down Albanian religious structures going back to the sixteenth century (*KNS* 26 Nov. 2001). It is as if Westminster Abbey were to be remodelled in the style of a Baptist chapel.

. . . A significant part of the western secular elite seems to have a kind of allergy to recognising eastern Christians as victims rather than oppressors -- no matter what the facts of the particular situation. The west needs to be truer to the best of its secular ideals, such as empirical observation and judicious analysis. Having won the Kosovo Albanians’ civil war for them, we now have a moral obligation to face the ugly truth about what is happening there today – and to act on it. . . . (*KNS* Feb. 2002).

Response from a historian of Eastern Europe

I would like to follow up on Mr. Uzzell’s sharp comments with some reflections of my own, as a historian of Eastern Europe myself. It is first of all important to emphasize that UN agencies and KFOR are engaging in needed

activities and are having many positive effects in the region. They are working with and helping to provide for refugees in huge numbers. In addition, UN influence has challenged and instituted proceedings against the slave sex trade which has bedeviled and defiled Balkan society. KFOR has assured a modicum of peace in Kosovo. The humanitarian endeavors and peace-keeping efforts are undeniable, unmistakable, and praiseworthy.

It is noteworthy, though, that the influence so far exerted comports with our particular and distinctive Western conceptions of justice and propriety. This is to be expected, of course; even so, one may still question whether UN and KFOR influence has sought to work within and to respect the particular and distinctive Balkan conceptions of culture and people. We have *applied* our collective sense of justice in our efforts in the region, but have we also *contextualized* that sense of justice, so that it speaks from within the conceptions of the peoples in the region?

The evidence indicates that we have not. UN agencies and KFOR have shown scant awareness of the significance of religion and religious sites in the region. In the Western conception of separation of church and state, such concerns might be assessed as lying outside the purview of a quasi-governmental organization. Furthermore, with the abuse to which religion has been subject over the last decade in the wars that have ravaged the western Balkans, one can appreciate why the UN and KFOR authorities would have little sympathy with and offer the barest of help to religion in the region.

However, for centuries, religion and culture have been all wrapped up together in the Balkans – for good and for ill. Religious sites are not just places where the few occasionally gather for soul care, as in much of the West. In the Balkans, religious sites – whether churches, mosques, or monasteries – are embodiments of a people’s sense of being. One might almost say that they serve as “sacraments” for the nations: they are “visible signs of an invisible reality,” they are the “signs and seals” of an ethnic group. Their significance cannot be tabulated by enumerating those who actually pass through the doors from month to month. To the peoples of the Balkans – whether they practice their respective religion or not – the religious sites of “their” people are standing witnesses to the presence and importance of their people; indeed, those sites are legitimations of the presence of those people in that area. Undeniably, the sites – churches, mosques, and monasteries – are cultural artifacts, often historic sites which deserve respect and protection as monuments from the past. But they have a significance far beyond the historical: they are transtemporal anchors of ethnic legitimacy, manifestations of a people’s pride, culture, presence, and hope for the future.

Given this, the UN and KFOR failure to offer better protection against and response to the arson and destruction visited upon numerous religious sites in the region must ultimately serve to exacerbate and intensify the problems in the region. If we only apply what we in the West have come to accept as justice, without contextualizing it to intersect with the instincts of the peoples in the region – in this regard, their religious sensibilities – then our efforts will amount to another form of

western imperialism. This will lead either to the destruction of a mainstay of the cultures we are supposedly trying to protect, or else to the repudiation of our project as only another Western attempt to dominate the world. To ignore religious aspirations and to tolerate the destruction of religious sites while supposedly seeking reconciliation and justice in the Balkans will prove, ultimately, to be an exercise in futility; throughout the region, for good or ill, religion is a significant component of the respective peoples' understanding of self and of others, and of right and wrong.

The question is not whether we in the West see religious sites in this way; the point is that the peoples of the Balkans all see religious sites in this way. Not to offer adequate protection to such religious sites, and not to pursue with vigor the apprehension, arrest, and trial of those responsible for arson and vandalism, can only worsen an already tense situation. In the Balkans, an attack on a religious site is a more devastating act of terrorism than an assassination. In the latter case, a recognized leader of a nation is killed; in the former, an entire people and its culture are violated. In the Balkans, an attack on a religious site is an act of ethnic cleansing.

This may not be the way we in the West instinctively respond to such vandalism. Our attitudes in this regard are well reflected in the responses of UN and KFOR authorities. However, in this regard, the important question for seeking and cultivating peace in the region is not how we see such attacks, but how the peoples of the Balkans see them. If we seriously hope to encourage and pursue

peace in the region, we need to view the situation with the eyes of the peoples of the Balkans themselves. We must contextualize our sense of justice, so that justice flourishes in the distinctive culture of the region. If we would do so – and if, more particularly, the UN and KFOR authorities in the region were to do so – then the response to attacks on religious sites (churches, mosques, and monasteries) would be dramatically different than what has been the pattern over the last many months. If we want to have any hope of achieving peace and securing justice in the region – rather than just imposing a ceasefire or our will – then we really have little choice.