

**CAREE CARRIES SUBVERSIVE MEMORIES:
RECENT REFLECTIONS ON MINISTRY IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA**

Gerald Shenk

Gerald Shenk is Professor of Church and Society at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, Virginia since 1989 and a regular REE contributor. Prior to that he served for nine years in former Yugoslavia with support from Mennonite Agencies (1977-83, 1989-89).

I was recruited by a Mennonite mission agency to spend some time studying in Eastern Europe. My wife and I landed in Croatia, Tito's Yugoslavia, in 1977 and spent six years there, working with other small evangelical Protestant communities. Then I did a doctoral program at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. I was nearing completion and pursuing a job search for teaching in the U.S., but in the midst of that process a letter arrived from Peter Kuzmič, calling us back to teach on an official basis with the Evangelical Theological Faculty in Osijek, Croatia.

That resulted in another three years of teaching and research, during what turned out to be the last period of socialist rule. We weren't fully certain of securing a visa and work permit, but Peter had received informal assurances that the time was ripe for attempting that, and within a few months after our return, the permits were granted. This was unique at that time.

We moved to Virginia in 1989, but I've been privileged to have church support to return to Eastern Europe almost every year since then, teaching in Osijek a brief intensive course every second year (on average), hoping to catch the advanced undergraduate students. The focus is usually sociology of religion, with elements of peacemaking and Christian ethics included also. This has been a real privilege for me; I'm deeply grateful for all that I've learned.

What do North Americans have to offer in ministry in Eastern Europe? As our conference here is posing the question, I want to take this opportunity to review my most recent journey back to the region of my former ministry there. I received an invitation to lecture again at the Novi Sad Theological College, in Serbia (Vojvodina). This is where I first began teaching, when it was called the Baptist Theological School. Now it is under the direction of my friend, Dimitrije Popadić, a graduate of the other institution in Osijek (Croatia). Dimitrije was currently away on sabbatical.

It had been 17 years since I had first taught in Serbia. During five of our early years in Yugoslavia, I spent a week there every month, usually teaching Introduction to the New Testament. Later during the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, I also came there on peace errands, hoping to bolster the peacemaking efforts of local Christians. One border guard up along the Hungarian train lines remembered me from one visit to the next in 1993 as “that guy who comes and tells the churches they ought to be doing something more for peace.” I deeply appreciated the favorable impression he displayed during some very dark hours. The war years interrupted the work of the Baptist school in Novi Sad, but the churches continued even under the threat of NATO bombing that wiped out the strategic bridges over the Danube in 1999. Like many other aspects of civil society, theological education had to be rebuilt in the aftermath of destruction.

On the surface level, many signs of life in the Balkans appeared to be returning to normal; during this journey, I also visited in Bosnia and in Croatia. Fields are tilled, buildings refurbished and traffic has been restored between areas long cut off from each other. Four distinct wars have swept across the regions of former Yugoslavia since we lived there, but physical reminders of the devastation are less and less conspicuous now. Most of the new countries are busy bolstering their chances to join the European Union by putting their economies in order, tending to greater justice in social policies, and scrambling to bring exports up to viable international standards. Judging by popular international brands spilling in ads across the landscape, the global economy has already determined that post-Communists make excellent consumers.

I welcomed the opportunity to return to Serbia in May 2006, with generous support from the Mennonite Central Committee. I’ve more often returned to teach in Croatia. Now I would see the changes at the Novi Sad school since it reopened in 2000. My observations now span more than a generation in church life. Several nearby pastors are my former students, and they’re sending their young people—even their children—to these classes now.

The current young students of theology barely recall anything of the preceding communist era. This is very hard for me to wrap my mind around, because when I return physically to the scenes of those former times, I am also returning psychologically to memories of the situation that obtained back then. The students are young and confident these days. They are engaging their world with much wider awareness than their predecessors in previous generations.

When I brought out a peacemaking story from Los Angeles after the 1992 Rodney King beating trial, one of the persons present in my classroom in Novi Sad in May had actually been residing in southern California when those incidents took place. This world is definitely smaller now that the gap known as the “Iron Curtain” has been removed. At another point in my sojourn in Novi Sad, a flock of visiting students came through from Richmond (Virginia), and the United Methodists among them were under the instruction of the same liaison adjunct professor who teaches in my own school in Harrisonburg (the omnipresent Dan Garrett).

What I cherish from interactions with my students in cultural anthropology this time in Serbia was a clear sense that a fresh look at the Gospel in varying cultural contexts has helped a significant number of them bring the lessons home. Stories out of Africa or from Serbia in the distant past (1970s!) enable them to begin asking new questions about their evangelical cultural heritage and the manner in which it engaged with the Orthodox Christian heritage largely responsible for the cultural memories of religion in Serbia. Most were prone to exhibit the default rejectionist stance, which is quite understandable in a sectarian tradition. But when one student began describing how he had decided to take his family’s traditional Orthodox *slava* and restore its earlier meaning with a recital of the Gospel in a simple meditation, others in the classroom began to rethink their own approaches to the dominant Serbian Orthodox culture around them.

The *slava* is the celebration of a family’s patron saint, so each family has their own time in the calendar for holding this observance. It usually involves quantities of adult beverages and food to an extent that may easily obscure the memories of ancient saints. But this student told how, when he became an active follower of Jesus Christ, he was moved to treat the custom with enough respect that he could hold a brief reflection for his gathered family based on some passage in the Bible. His father appreciated the move, and the pattern has continued.

This was a salutary lesson for me and for others in the classroom. I felt it was well worth carrying stories from Africa to Novi Sad (rather than from established church life in North America alone) if it opens this kind of re-engagement with heritage and culture there. Realizing their own position as a cultural minority, a number of students voiced greater empathy toward other religious and cultural minorities, gaining new respect for cultural differences in the light of Gospel experiences elsewhere.

Since my visit to Novi Sad in May, I have also recently attended a theology conference in the Islamic Republic of Iran, on the doctrine of the return of the *Mahdi*. This is of particular interest among Shiite Muslims. In contrast to the more prominent Sunni branches, Shi'a Islam is arrayed along the eastern ranges of earliest Islam, harking back to Persian roots and cultural memories that run deeper than a lot of the other issues we've been reviewing here from Eastern Europe today. I don't mean to equate or even draw close parallels between Mahdism and Marxism, but the sense of crossing over into unknown cultural territory where misperceptions can be costly was eerily reminiscent for me of our earlier border transgressings during the Cold War. Even after the years we spent with Bosnia's Muslims, this was a much more culturally remote encounter.

The Mahdi is a messianic figure, at least for this branch of Islam; the fervor of the doctrine in contemporary Iran is palpable. Not knowing what to expect, I imagined a gathering of several dozen scholars. Instead, fully 4000 packed a major convention hall, and the second opening address was delivered by the country's intense president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. For the 110 foreign guests, the event was filled with intrigue and some puzzlement. Remarkably, three evangelical Christians (including my two Mennonite colleagues, David Shenk and Tom Finger) were invited to make plenary presentations of the papers they prepared in advance. This constituted fully one eighth of the 24 plenary sessions.

If one might experience turmoil or trepidation on setting off for Iran in today's overheated climate, this is not too different from the ominous responses our work across the East/West divides used to encounter. Some of the fears being stirred up among our people depend again on demonizing an opponent, ascribing hostile motivations and vilifying anyone who is foolhardy enough to try to communicate across the widening gulf. CAREE folk are the kind who will move toward such encounters to overcome fear and suspicion by study, by learning and a passion for better understanding. We should not forget the legacy and the track record our intrepid colleagues have built up in the decades of relating to Christians and other persons of good will on the opposite side of our country's battle lines. I think we have a model that should not be scrapped just because the headlines have gone elsewhere.

But on the precise terms of the question as posed for our gathering here this weekend: interchurch and inter-religious tensions in post-Communist Eastern Europe—can Americans serve as reconcilers? My answer is “No.” And I have four reasons for it.

For one, U.S. foreign policy disqualifies and exacerbates everything we care about;

it's making things worse. Second, the U.S. formula for civic harmony will not export (largely a matter of ignoring or undervaluing differences). Third, the U.S. public grasp of history is too shallow. Fourth, what we do export is largely caricatures—Jesus cartoons, as it were. Why isn't there more controversy about that?

My answer is also "Yes." We have done some of this reconciliation in the past. I think we have also built relationships that are valuable preparation and antecedent for the kinds of engagement, for reconciliation that others have been describing here in our session already. We know people on all sides of most of the conflicts in Eastern Europe that really count right now, and those relationships are all the more precious when journalists, diplomats and businesspersons arrive cold and ignorant, without clues on what's really going on. There are real rewards for cooperation over time, and we are all the beneficiaries of that shared experience in the past. We know how to find the people who know how to cooperate, and that is a tremendous resource. Cooperating with us should be conditioned on willingness to partner with others in the local setting. We are equipped with enough background awareness to enter the pain and the struggles of the people we've lived with.

I have recently been compiling and reworking a set of stories that constitute what I'm calling best practices in peacemaking and reconciliation, part of our legacy from Eastern Europe encounters. There are other favorite stories in my collection also; one is from the San Egidio community in Rome. Re-using the trappings and legacy of empire for peacemaking, they became a prime force in work for the end of civil war in Mozambique during the 1980s. They had earned the respect of communists in Italy for their work with the poor, and those ties served them well after some international church leaders sought their aid in resolving an impasse that threatened widespread devastation if unchecked in the 20-year conflict there following the collapse of colonial rule.

My point here is that some of the structures and patterns of the empire may be turned instead to peaceful purposes, subverting from within by strategies that seek out the fault lines of conflicts early and late. With patient language learning and cultural studies, we can overcome our own culture's predilection for quick fixes. We have the power to hold deep passions and lengthy cultural memories in respect, knowing that today's headlines run in patterns that are much deeper than yesterday's encounters. Loyalty and genuine interest run deep and are richly rewarded, with friendship and hospitality that we've all enjoyed over the decades in Eastern Europe. I sometimes observe that you couldn't ask for better friends than

the Serbs I have known; you also wouldn't want them for enemies! When you have friends in Serbia, you have really good friends. Today's media will never tell us that, dependent as our news sources are on caricatures of the stranger, the enemy and the fearsome unknown.

I want to echo what Walter Sawatsky observed earlier today on confession, repentance and forgiveness as qualification that help us move across the new divides, to overcome cultural fears and deep distrust. We have learned much in our decades walking with friends in Eastern Europe, and I think we must not give up on the track record that was begun so faithfully and sturdily by people in this organization and by the partners we've gained from all those decades together.

Discussion:

Q. There's a story from Georgia about a Bishop Malkaz who took members of his church into the mountains to minister to Chechen rebels who had been attacked by the Russian government. In this ministry, the Muslims could not believe that these Christians, viewed as enemies, were coming to help them in their time of need, feeding them when they were starving. It ended up that those Chechen Muslims came to Bishop Malkaz's church just to celebrate the liturgy on a Sunday. This example seems to indicate to me that it may be more of a problem to think of the reverse of the question [i.e. can we help reconcile?] than to try to answer it any other way.

A. In the depths of the struggles in Bosnia, my friends there kept saying to me, "stop sending us these newly minted, two-year MA degree in conflict mediation persons. Why should they learn at our expense? We've been through this many generations already. We're the experts here, even if we're in the middle of the crisis ourselves right now. They can come here and learn from us, but don't let them think that they can come and solve these problems." So yes, your questions made its point very well, and I agree.

Another in that collection of stories I'm working on tells of fra Ivo Marković, the well-known Franciscan peacemaker there who received the Tannenbaum international award recently for his many efforts. He too practiced that kind of subversive outreach and caring for enemies, going up into the hills of Sarajevo under siege and talking with folks who had just beforehand been shooting down into the city. He would remind them of the good times together when neighbors had been close and warm. "Let's see, where did you live in the city? What kind of neighbors did you have there? How did you get along together? Did you have

grapevines there?” Pretty soon the police came down on him, figuring out that his nostalgia for recent better times was not just innocent nostalgia. He was using coffee conversation to subvert the hyper-enmity by which old friends had been manipulated.

Q. For just a second I was afraid the question would be about getting a group of missionaries from Eastern Europe to help us reconcile Republicans and Democrats!

A. We’d need a grant from the Soros Foundation for that!