

## **Religious Leadership After Conflict**

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Marko's grandmother was there, watching, while his grandfather was murdered. His grandfather was buried, like so many others during the war in Bosnia, in a mass grave, in the courtyard of their apartment complex. The grave is still there in front of their building, undisturbed, unmarked, and the murderers remain unpunished. Marko's grandmother knows who the murderers are, and many times he has asked her, "Who did it? Who killed my grandfather?" Yet she refuses to say. She knows that her grandson would not be able to resist the very human desire for justice – probably in the form of revenge – and so she remains silent. This is where the cycle of violence stops, she is saying with her silence.

When justice is unattainable, what mysterious grace is it that allows someone like that grandmother to maintain a peaceful silence and avoid being consumed by anger and vengeance? This is a crucial question for divided communities that are beginning to rebuild after conflict. It is one that the public policy community is asking increasingly with regard to areas such as Rwanda and the Sudan, Israel and Palestine, Northern Ireland and Chechnya, or the cities of North America. It is a profoundly religious question that presents a challenge to faith communities and will be central to their identity and vocation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is the question that a number of faculty and students in the schools of the Boston Theological Institute (BTI), the consortium of nine seminaries, schools of theology, and university divinity schools in Boston, have been asking as they draw upon the experience of organizations like the Mennonite Central Committee, the Community of Sant 'Egidio in Rome, and the Foundation for Moral Re-Armament (MRA).

MRA is an organization that for many years has drawn upon religious traditions as a way to approach the task of conflict resolution. Its historic conference center in Caux, Switzerland was the site where large numbers of French and Germans were invited after World War II to explore the possibility of reconciliation. And indeed, some dramatic reconciliation did occur there, as a French woman, Irene Laure, was inspired to apologize to Germans for having demonized them *all* as Nazis. When we at the BTI recently began to think of holding a conference for theology students from the former Yugoslavia, we thought of Caux. Perhaps such a conference might allow them to share an experience of grace, and begin to see past the demonization of one another that has led to so much conflict in the Balkans. As we began to plan the conference,

we also had in mind the work of organizations like the Community of Sant'Egidio, which fostered the peace process in Mozambique, and the Mennonite Central Committee, another religious organization that is acknowledged world-wide for their work in conflict resolution.

Inspired by these efforts, then, a group of us from the BTI began to examine how people of faith might be a force for peace in divided societies. This began with a series of study trips on the identity of the church in contexts of violence. Over the past several years, workshops have been held in such places as Northern Ireland, South Africa, and then in the Balkans in 1997. The faces of the young people we met in these settings have remained vivid in our memories. The trip to the Balkans was particularly inspiring for one of the students from Boston who participated, and she began to envision a conference on religious leadership after conflict for young theologians from the Balkans, to be held at Caux.

And so this past February, we were able to gather 40 students from Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, and Kosovo to spend an intense eight days getting to know one another and talking about their common difficulties. Some came as official representatives of their schools and religious communities; others were invited through mutual friends and existing peace organizations. They came from Muslim, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant communities, and were also accompanied by a few of their faculty members from the region, including Professors Nezdad Grabus and Xhabir Hamiti of Pristina, Msgr. Mato Zovkic, the Catholic Vicar-General of Sarajevo and Fra Ivo Markovic of Sarajevo, and Professor Father Radovan Bigovic of the Orthodox Theological Faculty of Belgrade. Others who joined us included Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff, Captain of the Chaplain Corps for the U. S. Navy, Orthodox Priest and Professor Vladimir Zielinsky of Sacred Heart University, Brescia, Italy, and Mr. Cornelio Sommaruga, former President of the International Committee of the Red Cross and now President of the Swiss Foundation of Moral Re-Armament.

The common journey began with a first exercise that asked participants to explain to one another how they had come to choose a career of religious service in their communities. We had planned it in order to accustom the participants to speaking openly to one another about their personal choices. It brought out with surprising candor the actual religious and spiritual experience of the students and helped to set a tone of personal communication that characterized the conference throughout.

The open atmosphere allowed for many remarkable stories to be told, like Marko's about his grandmother. One brave young man stood up and spoke openly about how he watched a priest in his community minister to people who were suffering during the war, and this example awakened in him a desire to

serve in this way as well. But in addition to such beautiful stories, there were also many conflicts and painful issues aired. The ongoing conflict in Kosovo is a very difficult issue for many throughout the region; our participants included both Albanians who had fled Kosovo during the NATO bombing, and Serbs who had fled Kosovo just weeks before the conference. Even those of us who have not experienced trauma of that sort have difficulty discussing issues like forgiveness, acknowledgment, and reconciliation. And so the conference led all of us to examine ourselves and the teachings of our faith more deeply as a result. The role that was played by the United States in the region continued to come up for question and analysis.

In retrospect, the idea to bring together theology students to listen and to learn from one another after the intense Balkan wars of the past decade was a natural choice for people involved in theological education. But this choice was also an important one strategically: If it is true that religious traditions in the region have been manipulated by nationalist leaders, then the next generation of religious leadership will have to deepen their understanding and appreciation of their own theologies, confessional understandings and practices. We realized after the conference that some of these young people have had little exposure to people of other ethnicities and faiths – unlike their parents, who grew up in a society that was forced to be multi-ethnic. One of the consequences of ethnic cleansing is this new degree of separation and isolation. Thus, simply providing a space to meet people from the other groups was one of the most important things we could do.

It is also important that this conference drew together young people who are sure to stay in the Balkans. These students have already demonstrated a commitment to the religious institutions they represent; they were selected for the conference by such local religious leadership as the Serbian Orthodox Church with the support of Patriarch Pavle, by regional Roman Catholic and Protestant leadership, and by local Islamic faculties. In an age in which many young people just want to emigrate, these students have demonstrated their commitment to their countries by deciding on a religious vocation – there would be little chance of employment for them outside of their own countries.

The conference ended on a truly hopeful note, as the participants put together a joint statement about their experiences at the conference. That statement is printed below. Yet there was also an additional statement put together by the students from Kosovo, who felt that their unique situation necessitated saying even more. In their statement, they wrote: “We vow that: We will teach coming generations to love one another and that hate isn't a virtue of a believer in God. We will continue to have contacts and we will act as one body who feels the pain of another. We will always raise our voice against those who exercise violence against God's precious creatures - humans, as well as

against those who exercise violence against religious buildings of whatever confession they be. Our prayer together to God is: Oh God, give us life and energy to love You and never let us go astray from Your way. Forgive the sins of all peoples in Kosovo and bless our place. Amen!"

The Caux conference and its continuing effects might be seen as a form of "Track II" diplomacy, or diplomacy apart from or outside regular government  
omacy is furthered by the explosive growth of non-governmental organizations, particularly religiously-based ones such as those mentioned earlier, seeking the common good in society. At its inception the Christian community saw itself bringing something new into being. This was the thrust of Paul's emphasis upon the church as a body with parts that needed one another (I Corinthians 12:12-13). The corporate dimension of this image is carried into Peter's metaphor of the church as a new social entity and holy priesthood (I Peter 2:9-10). Developed with reference to classical philosophy by Augustine and Aquinas, the idea of the common good wends its way through classical theology into such papal encyclicals as *Mater et Magistra* (1961), promulgated under John XXIII. The document *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), issued by the Second Vatican Council, calls attention to the importance of global interdependence as the common good takes on a universal complexion involving the rights and duties of the whole human race. The state is perceived not as primarily coercive (Hobbes), nor as representing merely the sum total of the interests of its members (Bentham), but as having a positive good (Plato, Aquinas). It is to promote the common good. This ultimately resounds to the good of individuals. It is this idea of society that is heralded by John Tirman as he calls attention to as the flowering of NGOs in the late twentieth century. These voluntary societies, James Luther Adams showed us, are often rooted in the churches.

The implicit cultivation of civil society was as much our goal as giving witness to our faith at the Caux conference. It is an illustration and recognition of the deep layers of dependency that exist between civil societies and faith communities, something increasingly being acknowledged among public policy theorists. Seen in the work of legal scholars like Harvard's Martha Minow, ideas like "forgiveness" or "reconciliation," once reserved for the confessional or private devotion, are becoming central to working with the political regimes and the civil societies of the twenty-first century. If Track I diplomacy takes seriously the reality of and need for political order, Track II diplomacy acknowledges the deeper social orders and cultures out of which evolve the state.

All of us at the Caux conference were challenged to examine the place for churches and other faith-communities in society. We were led to think that if forgiveness is to find its proper place in Kosovo, Boston or Washington, new patterns of community are required. Duke theologian L. Gregory Jones notes that

new practices in life are required in line with the new allegiances that forgiveness calls forth. Writing in his book, *Embodying Forgiveness*, Jones finds these practices growing out of a spirituality defined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer as “costly grace.” Such grace is pictured in the Passover story in Exodus, reminding us that the creation of a community of people often comes through a blood ritual epitomized earlier in the blood of the sacrificial lamb granted Abraham. This theme, according to Robert Schreier, is pictured in Christian theology in the sacrifice of Jesus. It illustrates the cost of community. As we live with forgiveness we are called to “fill up...the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the Church” (Colossians 1:24). It is the spirituality of costly grace that enables new forms of reconciliation to grow out of authentic forgiveness. Such forgiveness makes for good rhetorical resonance, or authenticity. It becomes the basis for a critical dialectic among neighbors of different faith communities, in the Balkans and elsewhere and reminds us that in the reconstruction of civil society churches and, indeed, all faith communities have an important role to play.

Indeed, many of the participants at our conference at Caux seemed to realize this and at the time of this writing are trying to put into practice what they have learned. One young Muslim man in Kosovo has decided to organize a “Peace and Tolerance” conference for young people of different faiths in Pristina, drawing on his experience at the Caux conference. Others from Croatia and Serbia recently traveled to Sarajevo, where they met with some of the participants from Bosnia. As one of them wrote to us, “Believe me, some of these people from Belgrade would never even have imagined traveling to Sarajevo before!” It is our hope that such moments of reconciliation will continue to occur, in ways that none of us would even have imagined.