

11-2007

An Ethnically Well-Mixed Christian

Peter Kuzmič

Evangelical Theological Seminary, Osijek, Croatia

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kuzmič, Peter (2007) "An Ethnically Well-Mixed Christian," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 27: Iss. 4, Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol27/iss4/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

AN ETHNICALLY WELL-MIXED CHRISTIAN

Peter Kuzmič

Peter Kuzmič, founder and president of Evangelical Theological Seminary, Osijek, Croatia is also Professor of World Missions and European Studies at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, and a frequent negotiator representing the free churches of the former Yugoslavia on inter-church and church-state issues.

I am a native Slovenian, born two kilometers from the Austrian border and six kilometers from the Hungarian border. I lived in Belgrade Serbia for 2 years, I lived in Bosnia for a couple of years, and I am a citizen of Croatia. So when people would hear this, especially in the early 1990s, they would say, “wait a moment...native Slovenian, citizen of Croatia, lived in Bosnia, lived in Serbia. You come from the part of the world where at the end of the 20th century they re-invented ethnic cleansing, and where people are frantically searching for their ethnic identity, and others are fanatically fighting for ethnic purity.” You know, we live in a world of warring identities, frequently we hear of “ethno-religious warfare,” making us aware how lethal that combination can be in its extreme forms and how disastrous its consequences are for human community. Bosnia is a vivid recent reminder here.

So they say, “now who are you *actually*? What is your *identity*? Aren’t you a little confused?” With people who think that I might be confused, I try to confuse still further with a little pedagogical devise, by bringing my wife Vlasta into the picture. I met her in Germany in a theological college where she came from Serbia, although she is Croatian, even though her father is half German and her mother is fully Czech! So the answer, I guess, would be in the slight paraphrase of Robert Frost, “Don’t worry about me, I’m not confused – I’m just well-mixed.”

I would like to think that as a Christian, as a follower of Christ who has a universal message, that if you believe in the universality of his redemptive mission in history and among the nations, then by that very logic you would have to believe in the inter-ethnicity, the internationality of those who are his followers. I wish it was like that, but it doesn’t always work like that. For we live in a part of the world, the post-Communist world, where for many there is a renaissance of national identity, along with the understandable recovery of the old national religion(s). This makes the ecumenical endeavors difficult, as Charles West noted, but in many ways it is difficult also with reference to human rights, democracy

and so on. It is very difficult when people think the ethnic identities co-exist with the religion of your predecessors and your own religion.

To answer the question: Can Americans serve as reconcilers? I think the answer is in that word “serve.” If they come to *serve*. If they come to dominate, no. If they come to push their own agendas, to impose their own schemes and goals of conflict resolution and reconciliation and whatever, getting their practice and paying their tuition as Gerry Shenk seemed to be saying, then no. If they really come to serve, yes. I would say that Gerry Shenk and other Mennonites like him would always be welcome. He had two advantages; one was being Mennonite, since there were no Mennonites in the former Yugoslavia, so nobody could own him and everybody knew he was not there to do Mennonite church planting. Mennonites in most cases take a servant attitude, so there was no fear of proselytizing or territorializing from them, or any of those things. His second advantage was that he was coming from a peace church. That is very helpful, because you know he can go to Serbia and teach there because he doesn’t belong to the Americans that would bomb Belgrade. There are other advantages, but it would take too long and I don’t want to embarrass him publicly. He knows that when the winds of war started blowing, I started to invite Mennonites to teach. We even got John Howard Yoder to teach before and after the war; unfortunately he died when his next course was scheduled. We have some wonderful Mennonite servant leaders like Myron and Esther Augsburgers, who come regularly, and a number of others, such as David Shenk, who recently made quite an impact in Kosovo.

Let me give you a more recent example that will help answer the question of serving as reconciler. We became a seminary in exile in 1991, when the war escalated. We had to evacuate the school, but one of our faculty, Christine Marshall, a wonderful, quiet, self-effacing and always serving person from the Seattle area who taught English for a number of years, was not there when we evacuated the school. She had a minor accident, fell off a bicycle and providentially ended up in the hospital when the trucks and other forms of transportation were taking students and the reference library out of the city. So Chris Marshall stayed in the city – an American – and served the Serbian neighbors who would otherwise be targeted by Croats taking revenge.

One out of five citizens, 20% of the citizens of Osijek were Serbs. Now this was definitely a Serbian aggression, Serbs shelling the city. Yet now Serbs were also the target, and there were Serbs, people of mixed marriages, who were targeted by fanatics on both

sides. There were also some elderly folks that no one had helped to evacuate. Out of a population of over 120,000, only 19,000 were left in Osijek, and half of those were soldiers trying to evacuate the population and protect the city, while half were people who did not have anyone to help them evacuate. We took some of those people into the basement of the school, and Chris Marshall was helping to serve them. Here was a true healer and a reconciler. In that basement there were elderly Croats, and there were neighboring Serbs threatened by retaliation. I was trying to arrange for some food to come in, which was not easy, and provide some medical assistance to a hospital that was bombed out. They feared that they would have to operate without anesthesia like other hospitals in smaller towns had to do.

Two of my colleagues in Slovenia including an American, risked their lives to go to Osijek to rescue the American, Christine Marshall. When they got to Osijek, they said “Chris, we’ve come to rescue you, to take you out of danger.” And Chris said, “Take me out of danger? What about these people?” And they started to argue with her, “Chris, you have to leave, you are an American citizen. The State Department has issued orders a long time ago that all Americans should leave Croatia. There’s not one American left in Croatia, you are the only American left. You are breaking the law of your country.” Christina in her quiet way just looked at them and said to her fellow American, “Paul, I’m not going. I have a ministry here.” He said, “You HAVE to go! Your government has ordered you to go.” She just looked at him and said, “Paul, I’m not going because I have higher orders to obey.” She stayed throughout the war, and became known in the city as the Evangelical Mother Theresa of Osijek, whatever that highly complimentary combination means. She can be a reconciler because she has modeled what it means to live between antagonistic camps and to serve the needy on both sides without regard for her own well-being.

In my native Slovenia, Reformation Day is a national holiday, as it is in some West European countries too. At the Evangelical Theological Seminary we have pioneered what is by now the most strategic ecumenical endeavor in former Yugoslavia, The Reformation Week. Reformation is here not understood in a static way as a date in history but as a comprehensive call to both *ad fontes* and *semper reformanda*. The week is marked by an ecumenical Christian Book Fair, with various authors speaking to both church and public audiences. There are public dialogues and round tables on various subjects related to the churches’ mission in the world as well as inter-religious dialogues and ecumenical

presentations. Osijek is strategically located - half an hour from the Serbian border, 40 minutes from Bosnia, very close to Hungary. This is where Eastern and Western Christianity meet each other and jointly encounter the Bosnian Islam as well. I must confess that in many ways being involved in ecumenical ventures was easier in the last decade under Communism than it was after these countries got their independence and started warring with each other while instrumentalizing their exclusive national religions. And yet we provided the first public platforms for the Catholic and Orthodox theologians and authors to meet on a neutral and yet Christian ground. This year, for example, along with several other leading Catholic and Protestant speakers, we hosted Radovan Bigovič, former Dean of the Belgrade Orthodox Faculty of Theology and probably the most influential Serbian Orthodox theologian and the famed Franciscan Croatian writer Zvonimir Bono-Sagi as the principal speakers. Radimir Rakič, who participates annually, has been the well-known editor of *Pravoslavlje*, the official organ of the Serbian Orthodox Church. He was the chief editor when *Pravoslavlje* was, as Paul Mojzes can confirm, at its best, and he also represented the Serbian Orthodox Church on the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches. We continue to ask ourselves how we can bring together the Orthodox Serbs and the Catholic Croats? We have learned that on the Croatian side it works easier with the Franciscans from Bosnia, not the Franciscans from Hercegovina – that again is another story.

At this event we bestow what is called an *Ekumenska povelja*, or an ecumenical award. There is an ecumenical committee with persons from Sarajevo, Belgrade, Novi Sad, Zagreb, Lubiana. Decisions have to be by consensus, which is not an easy task. This year the award was to go to Zeljko Mardesic (alias Jakov Jukic), a well know sociologist of religion from Split, a promoter of ecumenical dialogue and an engaged lay leader in peace and reconciliation endeavors. Since he unexpectedly died before the event the Committee decided to give the award posthumously to Tomislav Sagi Bunic and Josip Turcinovic, two ecumenical pioneers, who've done much to promote the Vatican Council reforms, and became known as founders of the progressive Theological Society *Krscanska sadasnjest* and a very successful publishing house known by the same name. We were please with the way the media presented this story and related events so as to educate the general public about the need for dialogue, reconciliation and promotion of culture of tolerance. I recently noticed the article in *REE* on "Inventing Ecumenism in Transylvania, Romania." Well, we are in the process of *reinventing* ecumenism in former Yugoslavia, and it is not easy – it is swimming

against the stream. It is very interesting that now the minority evangelicals, who are not necessarily political evangelicals as in this country, are building bridges between the two large confessions that are so identified with their nation-states, and who still wonder whether we (as evangelicals) can be legitimate partners in nation building. This of course, is another question for religious and ethnic minorities to consider in search of the definition of their own role in new post-socialist states.

To what extent are we constructive partners in nation building in these new nations? We are publicly speaking up on ecumenical concerns and we are actively engaged in the defense of human rights and religious liberties for all. My own work in this area as a member of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights has been a journey marked by many stations of both controversy and many opportunities to act as an agent of justice and reconciliation. There is a growing recognition that if we don't build a culture of dialogue, a culture of tolerance, a culture of mutual acceptance, we have no future. People are beginning to learn that if they really want to become members of the European family of nations, they will have to become ecumenical in the best sense of that word. Because (and you will forgive me for using the word) de-Balkanizing, meaning a certain exclusive mentality in our churches, has to be one of the imperatives, if we are to become truly European and to make some kind of an impact on our social order, which is in such great need. There are still many tasks ahead of us and a search for adequate models of a transformative ethical engagement continues.

We are also dialoguing with the Muslims. Twice now I have participated with Sefko Omerbasić, the grand mufti of Croatia and Slovenia, in a TV dialogue. People called in, and their responses were encouraging. Fortunately, the national TV has slowly opened up space for inter-confessional and inter-religious dialogue. It is still an uphill battle, but there are a few signs of hope.

Now let me tell you a little story, that helps explain why I have just been in Kosovo for the third time in the last couple of months [fall of 2006]. As you know, we have produced six new nation states in the former Yugoslavia. Montenegro had a referendum and declared itself independent earlier this year, which has created another great difficulty for the Serbian Orthodox Church in addition to the unresolved issue of the autocephality of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Now it looks like the international community has more or less decided to grant Kosovo independence as well. Kosovo has not been under Serbian rule for quite some time now, but in terms of international law, they are part of Serbia. So it is a very hot issue,

and there are all kinds of ramifications for the neighboring nations, especially for Macedonia, where up to one third of the population are ethnic Albanians. There is a growing Albanian minority in Montenegro as well. Fortunately Albania itself does not have a dream of building a greater Albania. And of course since the international community prevented the creation of Greater Serbia and Greater Croatia, a Greater Albania will also not be allowed. So it looks like Mr. Athisari, the former prime-minister of Finland, with the support of the American State Department as well as the European Union – are saying that Kosovar independence is the only way to resolve the issue of the future of the province. Serbia is fiercely opposed to any kind of independence but the thinking of the international community is: let's supervise the process for awhile making sure that Kosovo becomes a sustainable, democratic new nation, until the nation-states within Europe will no longer be that important, for it will be a Europe of Euro-zones rather than Euro-nations.

Here enters the picture, as a mini case study, the well known defender of the Serbs of Kosovo, their spiritual leader Bishop Artemije, known also as a fierce anti-ecumenical crusader. I have met him several times, and have many issues with him because he has written guest editorials in *Pravoslavlje*, the official organ of the Serbian Orthodox Church, where he anathemized anybody that would pray with the Catholics or especially with the Protestants, and threatened with “expulsion any Orthodox believers who would dare to cross the threshold of the Roman or Protestant churches.” He has recently moderated his language somewhat, but not the conceptual framework. He is a very militantly anti-ecumenical bishop, but a bishop who has done everything to keep Kosovo within Serbia. He has come to the USA a number of times, and I was a member of the hosting committee on behalf of the Boston Theological Institute when we enabled him to speak at Harvard Divinity School. Some months ago Archbishop Artemije came to the USA again, but this time with the help of a lawyer's association and a very strong lobby from Washington D.C. Millions of dollars were invested. These experts drew up a list of the most politically influential Christians in the USA who could help Serbia to keep Kosovo as part of Serbia. The list included Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, among others, providing a long explanation saying that Jerry Falwell started Moral Majority, which elected Ronald Reagan, and Pat Robertson started the Christian Coalition, which elected George Bush, Jr twice. I've seen some of what were initially confidential documents, which said not only that these persons are so powerful that they have helped place two judges on the Supreme Court, that is, two conservative Catholics,

including John Roberts, who is the Chief Justice! They also cited an article from a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*, on the political power of American evangelicals.

In short, Archbishop Artemije, together with a company of friends and lawyers went to Virginia and visited Robertson and Falwell. He showed them pictures of churches and monasteries destroyed. Unfortunately, there was indeed a fanatic revenge in March 2004, and nobody can deny the destruction and damage done to Orthodox buildings. But Bishop Artemije met with the people who at home would be his enemies, and both of whom – understand this is the irony – prayed with him! Yet he would never pray with anyone who is not Orthodox – he has told us that many times, and has put that in print. But one of these gentlemen then went straight into his powerful TV studio and made a statement to the effect: ‘I’ve just met with a Christian bishop from Serbia. Christians churches are attacked – I have seen pictures. Jihad is in Albania. A very powerful movement, about to exterminate any Christians and Christian places of worship in Kosovo.’

BBC News ran the story. The Serbian nationalist movement had found a powerful ally in the Religious Right in America.” The *Financial Times* printed almost a full-page article and others in the press followed. You have seen some of these reports. Some Serbian papers reported triumphantly how the American Evangelicals who will help Serbia keep Kosovo. Many of us following these bizarre stories came to the conclusion that the Religious Right cannot help us toward reconciliation in Eastern Europe. The thing that is so sinister is that the documents these lawyers had drawn up for these leaders of the Religious Right, claimed that the problem was that the Clinton folks are still dictating foreign policy in the State Department and they are enemies of Serbia. Blame it on Clinton and you have the support of the Religious Right. Truth is not what matters here!

Now the irony was that the Serbian Parliament had passed a law on religious affairs at the end of April, which does not recognize these Protestant churches (sister denominations of the American Evangelicals) as churches. It recognizes only ethnic Protestant churches. You cannot be a Serb and Protestant. You can be a Slovak and Lutheran, or Hungarian and Reformed. While the Albanian (Kosovo) Parliament actually took into account some of the documents we from the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights regional committee had submitted, and recognized the Islamic, Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox, and Evangelicals as legitimate religious communities. But here you have a bishop from a nation, one of those who fought for the Protestants not to be recognized, now aligning himself with the conservative

Protestants in the USA, in order to fight against those who actually have given these Protestants freedom.

What has happened since? We had an attack on one of the evangelical churches, two of my former students have been personally attacked recently, and we have a negative fallout because others have been called in by Albanian authorities and secret service agents who said to them, “oh, these are your allies in America.” This is the freshest case study of **what not to do** when you are an American, if you want to be an instrument of reconciliation. Let me just say, we *do* need help from this country, especially from people like you who do have an ecumenical vision and take the name of Jesus seriously, and don’t reduce it to an ethnic identity or confessional, denominational triumphalism. We need more people over there who will help this process. We need workshops like this, when you bring the nationals (I hate this word, but you know what I mean) – the Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims together. Go back to Sarajevo, and there are a few things going on there. Actually, the Archbishop of Canterbury has recently taken a very helpful and creative initiative to bring together Christian and Moslem leaders to dialogue and plan for peace and justice in Bosnia and globally. We need to continue to swim against the stream, and to broaden the horizons of freedom and an understanding of what a full-fledged democracy and pluralist society is all about. What it means to follow Christ in Christ’s way.

DISCUSSION

Q: When I think about the theme of ignorance within the American Evangelical world, and also more broadly in this society, how does one get the willfully ignorant to the point where they would hear a different point of view? Can you function personally as someone who can talk to Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell and they might notice?

A: Ask me tomorrow. The Baptist bishop from Georgia was mentioned earlier, and there are a few other east European evangelical spokespersons, but they are all so busy and not part of the international networks. We need to find a way to draw those people in, or to get over there and help empower them – provide some training seminars, help with literature and so on. It is not easy. I said “ask me tomorrow” because I have made several calls recently and have written to Pat Robertson, and I’ve written to some other people. I spoke at a commencement some 15 years ago at Regent University, but later I became critical until I saw Harvey Cox write an article for *Atlantic Monthly* about that University and was rather

positive. Cox likes to surprise us, but I talked with him, and he was rather impressed. Well, a few things have happened since that time, and I have said we will have to go to press. That is very difficult to do, because some of us have Serbian friends, and I don't want to take a political side here.

But the hypocrisy of a nationalistic bishop to go and ask for support from those he considers his ecclesiastical enemies, and I know this is too strong of an expression, is an alliance of the fundamentalists around the world – militant fundamentalists. And that's the danger, because they will make things worse. We have decent, wonderful Muslim leaders we can talk with. I was recently in Malaysia for a conference, and was impressed with the Islamic scholars in Kuala Lumpur. I've seen some of their writings; they're fighting for the rights of women, democracy. I asked them how that is, and they said Islam did not come here by sword but by trade – south Indian traders. We need a global dialogue and get the people together who share the vision for a more peaceful world, and somehow maybe publicly embarrass, or help dismantle these schemes and conspiracy theories that are fueling the fires of the *ihadists*.

...We need to forge new alliances with a concern for the future – the future of our children and grandchildren, and for the concern of peace in our world. Not naïve utopians, because there are realities that need to be dealt with realistically, but by people truly of good will.