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SWIMMING UPSTREAM: RELIGIONS WORKING FOR PEACE

It is not easy to find encouraging news of religious peace-making in the torrent of news about conflict, hatred, self-righteousness, and violence emanating from various parts of Eastern Europe, particularly the Balkans. I chose to select two events in which I recently participated--not in order to lift them up as trend-making but to single them out as symbols of a flickering flame of hope in the midst of darkness.

Ranking the two events in importance, let me first describe the more recent one, the conference on "Christian Faith and Human Enmity" which took place in Kecskemét, Hungary, August 21-27, 1995, (See the Press Release and Letter to the Churches in the Documentation section of this issue). "Christian Faith and Human Enmity" was designed as a process that would culminate but not end in the aforementioned conference. From the beginning the entire process was jeopardized several times due primarily to enmities (what else!) found in unexpected places (usually within Christian communities) for which a great deal of faith, patience, and persistence was needed to overcome the obstacles.

The genesis of the process goes back to the very early 1990s to an informal meeting at Princeton Theological Seminary where it was sensed that the ecumenical Christian community needs to consciously challenge the destructive misuse of nationalism which swept not only secular but even the Christian communities of Eastern Europe. It began to take shape when Dr. Károly Tóth, the President of the Ecumenical Study Center in Budapest, indicated his willingness to organizationally administer the process and CAREE decided to support it. Subsequently the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Hungary and the Europe Committee of the National Council of Churches (USA) gave the project their blessing.

A preparatory conference took place in August 1993 in Kecskemét, a lovely provincial city some fifty miles south of Budapest. The local Reformed Churches agreed to be the generous hosts, volunteering the services of many of their members in order to make the meetings possible. The preparatory conference gave general direction to the shape of the ensuing process but numerous additional planning meetings had to take place by a smaller Planning Committee.

Realizing that the conference would be a failure if it were only a predominantly Protestant event with a smattering of Eastern Orthodox participants, much additional work in the background was needed to make the process inclusive. The turning point took place

in the early months of 1995 when the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Hungary accepted to co-sponsor the event along with the Ecumenical Council of Churches of Hungary. Invitations were mailed, finances were obtained (mostly in Germany and the USA), much organizational work was done, and many volunteers contributed their talents. At last the conference took place and the result was exceptional.

About 180 delegates, observers, guests, and others arrived in Kecskemét from about twenty-five countries. An unusual mix of top leaders of various denominations mixed with grass-roots peace activists; lay and clergy, professors and delegates from World Council of Churches, Council of European Churches, Council of Catholic Bishops' Conferences, and others mixed and mingled in worship, plenary lectures, workshops, Bible study, and recreation. None were there with the authority to negotiate, but all were there in a Christian spirit of exploration, gaining insights, regretting the sinful rivalries of nation and religion. While many may have come without a clear idea of what was to happen, the spirit of the conference was so positive that as the program unfolded it became clear that this was not the occasion to condemn the behavior of any single church or nation but rather that ways would be sought for raising the Christian witness on behalf of reconciliation.

Unwilling to make grandiose declarations, the conference worked through several drafts of a 'pastoral' letter to all churches in southeast, central, and eastern Europe, to all other churches as well as other religious and non-religious people, inviting them to join the efforts toward reconciliation and to more constructive dealings with ethnic hostilities.

The hope is that the Letter to the Churches and Christians will receive wide dissemination and study by diverse groups of people. Much to our delight and surprise the conference was 'discovered' by the media. First the Hungarian TV and Radio was attracted by the unusual sight of an international conference at the head table of which were seated bishops of the three largest churches in Hungary (Catholic, Reformed, and Lutheran)--certainly a rare sight! Then the word got around to journalists representing other agencies, such as the BBC, Dutch Radio, CBS, and Kathpress from Vienna that something important was taking place. They descended upon Kecskemét, snapping official statements of the conference and papers and interviewing many of the participants. It is apparent that the press also longs for some 'good news' from Eastern Europe rather than mostly self-serving ethnoreligious declarations.

Not all journalists accurately understood what took place. The Voice of America program erroneously stated that "Croatian Roman Catholic and Serbian bishops have agreed to work together for peace in Bosnia." There was both a Croat Roman Catholic and a Serbian Orthodox bishop present, but they did not even speak with one another much less agreed to cooperate; this was not the kind of conference where church representatives would negotiate. The letter was drafted with the larger Eastern European community in mind and not merely Bosnia, and the vote to adopt and send the letter did not imply any specific agreements by

official church leaders. It was, however, in my opinion, a step forward that the Serbs and Croats merely avoided each other rather than entering into vigorous indictments and rebuttals, as they have been known to do at other conferences. The reason is simple: at the Kecskemét conference their problems were encompassed into the larger set of problems affecting nearly all of Eastern Europe to which the Balkans is basically a warning of how far things can go when they are permitted to deteriorate.

The conference had its shortcomings. As is often the case, there were too few women and young people. No one came from countries such as Albania, Austria, and Bulgaria nor from the Baltic and Scandinavian states. The shortcomings did not prevent many participants from feeling that something new and worthwhile was taking place. Some of them pledged to continue meetings and dialogues with their rivals/partners in local communities. The conference endorsed the Planning Committee's continued work, not with the purpose of establishing an organization but seeing how the same process may be encouraged to take place in other location. A specific invitation to organize a similar conference in Skopje, Macedonia, was found by many as intriguing.

The second event was the Summer School "Interconfessional Dialogue and Understanding" that took place in Ulcinj, a small resort town on the Yugoslav-Albanian border in Montenegro, July 2-14, 1995. This was the third session of the school, the first having been held in 1993 in Novi Pazar (the Sandzak area of Serbia), the second in 1994 in Ohrid, Macedonia. The summer school is a cooperative effort by a peace group in Subotica, Vojvodina (Yugoslavia) and group of British and Dutch scholars. Most of the funding was provided by the government of Holland.

For the third session, which had to be reduced in duration and the number of participants because an expected source of funding did not materialize, seventy-five students and about ten faculty were brought together. The majority of the students were from various parts of Yugoslavia (Serbia, Vojvodina, Kosovo, Montenegro), Macedonia, Croatia, Italy, Romania, Turkey, Greece, Holland, Denmark and Great Britain while the faculty came from Great Britain, USA, Holland, Italy, and Yugoslavia. Daily the students attended several lectures dealing with subjects such as civil society and civil religion, conflict resolution techniques, the role of religion in history, and concepts of democratic social developments. The participants also interacted with faculty and each other in discussion groups and carried out field work by engaging local Orthodox and Muslim clergy in conversations.

Both undergraduate and graduate students were present, as well as young professionals such as teachers and journalists. Most of them ranged in age from twenty to thirty years. They mixed well, though there were also obvious reluctances and anxieties at the outset. For instance, at the beginning it was obvious that Serb and Kosovo Albanian students were somewhat reluctant to interact as the political events have raised suspicions and distanced

them from each other. But as the program advanced it was obvious that such artificial barriers separating ethnic groups would not stand in the way of these young intellectuals from exploring issues of common interest and even socializing with one another--something that was quite natural prior to the recent Balkan warfare but is now frowned upon by many nationalists of that area. The older of the participants were frankly nostalgic for the time when young people from the entire area had mutually friendly relations but are now being kept apart by new borders, real and artificial. Tentative plans were made to organize the next summer school somewhere in Croatia, pending, of course, the availability of funding and the willingness of the government of the host country to grant visas to all invited.

Surely these two events are not going to change the confrontational situation of the present moment, but perhaps events like this provide some seed for trust-building that will be necessary if and when the war-makers exhaust themselves and the chance for building bridges between ethnoreligious groups presents itself. Training for democratic decision-making in society and religious organizations will come in handy when people realize that national chauvinism is a destructive madness unable to offer lasting progress and happiness for the people of Eastern Europe.

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