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Paul Mojzes
Rosemont College

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**THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN TIMES OF CONFLICT IN
MULTINATIONAL AND MULTIRELIGIOUS SOCIETIES - a Contribution
Toward Interreligious Dialogue in Macedonia**

by Paul Mojzes

Founder and Editor of REE till 1997, as well as associate editor of Journal of Ecumenical Studies, Paul Mojzes recently completed a term as Academic Dean at Rosemont College. This paper was part of the materials prepared for the Trialogue of Christian, Jewish and Muslim scholars to be held in Skopje Macedonia. His translation of the article by Cvitkovic referred to, follows.

It is natural for most people to wish for harmony in the communities in which they live, whether these be local, regional, national, or international. However, given the realities of human nature, it appears that we have come to think that it is equally “natural” for conflicts and violence to disrupt our lives and cause great suffering.

Various conditions may exist in our societies at a given time. They range from the most destructive, the worst which can occur in a nation or the world, which is war, to various less violent forms of antagonism, or to indifference among societal groups, or to attempts to negotiate between groups that hold contradictory interests, or to active tolerance of differences, or to cooperation between various groups, and in some cases even an integration into a new synthesis. These stages are often changing; sometimes several conditions may be taking place simultaneously.

There is a method or approach whereby one can deal with disparate and even conflicting aims and situations which is called *dialogue*. Since it has become habitual to us the word dialogue for practically every kind of conversation or exchange, Leonard Swidler and Ashok Gangaden coined the term “*deep-dialogue*” in order to describe a special kind of encounter between those who do not hold identical views. “Deep-Dialogue is a method of entering into other worlds or perspectives thus gaining a deepened sense of one’s own worldview and an awakened awareness of the worldview

of Others.”¹ Thus deep-dialogue can be a powerful transformative “technology.” It can lead to “learning how to live together in genuine respect and mutual care. Human relations break down when diverse worlds collide”² in the form of ethnic conflict, racial hatred, ideological confrontations, and similar.

Dialogue in this sense of the word is a relatively new phenomenon, practiced more widely in the twentieth century when it became a means of addressing long-standing tensions between communities that could not be resolved by the traditional forms of confrontations. Obviously such *deep-dialogue* can be more easily practiced in stable societies in which a greater measure of tolerance and cooperation already exist and where the memory of hatred and destruction had begun to fade.

In societies that are beset by war and powerful antagonisms many people think that first such conflicts have to cease and then dialogue may begin. However, we are convinced that even in the most distressing circumstances of distrust and fear *deep-dialogue* ought to be attempted by people of good will as it can greatly contribute toward a better mutual understanding and creation of condition of trust at least by leaders and other opinion-makers, which can then be transmitted to the common people who are eager to find ways to a more harmonious societal and global relationships.

Many parts of the world, including the so-called post-Communist countries, are experiencing profound convulsions of very complex nature. The Republic of Macedonia is one such country. Its population, like that of some of the neighboring countries, is multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual, multireligious. As is the case in many other European countries certain ethnic groups are almost co-extensive or concurrent with a religious community. The vast majority of Slavic Macedonians are Orthodox Christians, though some are Catholic, Muslim, Protestant, agnostic, and atheist. The second largest ethnic group is the Albanians of Macedonia who are also mostly adherents of one religion, namely Islam, though some are Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, agnostic, and atheist. The smaller religious communities differ in ethnic composition but are also part of the

¹ From a pamphlet, *Global Dialogue Institute*.

² *Ibid.*

community called the Republic of Macedonia.

It is a well-known fact that when nationality and religion overlap there are some positive and some negative outcomes. A major question is whether the specifically *religious* factor in the ethnoreligious identity can have a positive influence on bringing the entire country toward greater mutual trust, cooperation, tolerance, and peace.

In a somewhat oversimplified way one may say that the leadership of the religious communities can either contribute to the crisis, or avoid involvement in social developments in the state or local community, or make efforts to mend the broken relationships toward a happier and more stable common house for all. We know that during the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, regrettably many religious communities allowed themselves to be manipulated into adding fuel to the fire of interethnic hatred and violence, while others felt that they could not make any meaningful contribution toward peace. The war between nationalities certainly affected the relationship between the religions which have become quite strained and even hostile. There were, of course, some notable exceptions of courageous anti-war advocacy and cooperation for the sake of peace-making and reconciliation. While the situation in different republics of the former Yugoslav federation vary and cannot be simply transferred from one to the other, nevertheless, it would be unwise to dismiss some important lessons.

Professor Ivan Cvitkovic³ undertook a sociological analysis of the role of religion in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in which he explored the complex relationship between ethnicity and religion⁴ and how the extreme nationalists of all three groups were able to manipulate the religious feelings of many people. He points out that religion contributed to the fall of "socialism" because they were the only institutions allowed to hold to views not in line with the official ideology.

"In the war it became evident how the ruling ideology moves from secular to religious values. Religion and religious institutions became one of the pillars of society In the process of revitalization of religion under

³ From his manuscript "*Konfesija u ratu*" sent to the author in typescript form, here published as "Religions in War, the Example of Bosnia and Herzegovina."

⁴ For other views see Paul Mojzes (ed), *Religion and War in Bosnia* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998).

war conditions, tolerance and interreligious dialogue weakened. If a religious institution has identified itself with the state, then other religions were considered as destabilizing and distrust toward them increased. Elements of such distrust could be evidenced by the religions in the territory that the other "ethnic army" held. On that basis grew the motivation for participation in the war but often one obtained the support of "unbelievers" because of the feeling of peril by their religion. And therefore, 'there is no peace among nations until there is peace among religions,' as Hans Kueng wrote. Dialogue and tolerance are indispensable in societies that are ethnically, religiously, culturally diverse. The return of tolerance is necessary for the survival of both the ethnicity and religion on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina... Did the war lead to increase in religiosity? Such a conclusion is suggested by an increase in the number of declared believers, upsurge in religious practices, the increased influence of religion and denominations upon everyday life. The credibility of religion and religious institutions was amplified; their political role is no longer marginal. In a war that takes place in a multireligious area revitalization of religion takes place with a obligatory intermingling of the religious with the national and vice versa."⁵

From the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as from others it is evident that it is a mistake to wait for the conflicts to end before interreligious dialogue begins. Indeed, one could argue that religious leaders are able to find inspiration in their holy scripture and other traditions and writings to work with one another even when the relationship between politicians and the population is strained to the utmost and general distrust prevails in society.

Where would religious leaders find such courage and strength? Is it that they are better, wiser, stronger, and more able than other leaders? No. The answer is rather to be found in the message given by God to each community and entrusted to the leaders to uphold, proclaim, and nurture. Despite the fact that we --Jews, Christians (of various churches) and Muslims-- believe in one God and know that God desires for the entire world to live in peace and goodness we are, regrettably, heirs of distrust and disharmony among each other. From the long histories of conflict, persecution, and suffering we have come to consider it natural that we cannot get along with each other in a trusting, secure,

⁵ Ibid.

respectful, and mutually appreciative way. It is regarded almost miraculous when communities live in peace and harmony, the condition that God desires for us.

Every human being, including religious leaders, has a number of concerns, minor as well as major. We humans have a tendency to focus our concerns primarily or exclusively for the well being of our own group, family nationality, or religious community. We even tend to look at God as *our* God, only ours. It is normal to give priority to the interests of the group over which we have special responsibility. But our three great faiths,--Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all being universal religions--do not accept the notion of a tribal God, a God only of our people, even when we believe that ours is the best expression of the human response to God. We all believe that all people—more than that, the entire creation--is under God's domain and care. And that mandates that we take a broader view—namely, that all people, whatever their shape and form, are our sisters and brothers, even if we do not get well along at a particular historical time and place. The human family is God's family. Therefore we are obligated by the broader understanding of God's revelation, to include in our care and concern, others, even enemies, as difficult as that may be.

And, indeed, we all know that it is difficult to follow God, for it seems to be the human conditions that in order to do bad we don't have to use much effort but to do good we must often strive very hard. To follow God, as we have seen from the numerous historic examples of those in all of our religions who did so, we must live on the edge, we must be willing to sacrifice, we must expose ourselves to threats from both within and without. We must ask ourselves, what does God want from me, from us, to do with our lives for our families, communities, country, and the world?

God, however, promises the miracle of blessing—in this case the blessing of peace. Our religions teach us that we cannot accomplish all things by our own efforts and strengths. Those challenges are so great that they can easily crush us. But our religions teach us hope and assurance that God's intentions for human well-being will ultimately triumph. In this process, however, we must not frustrate God's will for us but be on God's side. We can do this individually and separately but we can do it a thousand times

more effectively collaboratively with all our religious communities and other people of good will.

The international Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue (dialogue between the three partners) is several decades long and has become a sign that we do not have to passively accept the hostilities, which characterized and continue to determine the relationships between the followers of the three great Abrahamic faiths. We know from the experience of the past dialogues that great strides can be made by leaders and scholars of the three religions when we are willing to engage in respectful sharing of each other's insights, aims, frustrations, fears, and hopes and listening to our partners. We are inviting the religious leaders and scholars from the three faiths of the Republic of Macedonia to join us in our continued search for peace and understanding and to continue such deep-dialogue in your own country both when we are present and, more importantly, when we are gone.

Prayer:

"O God, by whichever name we call You. You are the Great Architect, who has set the world on its foundations, and out of nothing, built a world that has everything we need, help us to see this as a time to build.

To build a world that seeks peace and justice for all;

To build nations that are unified in common purpose and common commitment to love you and our neighbors as ourselves

To build lives that put our trust not in the things of this world but in You.

O God, bless those who suffer and have experienced disasters. Forgive us and others when our own aims and securities put others at risk. Help us build a life and a community that brings honor and glory to Your name.

Amen.