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REPORT ON
"ECUMENICAL AND INTER-RELIGIOUS ROUND-TABLE
ON THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA"
8-11 DECEMBER 1993, PECS, HUNGARY

by David A. Steele

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The Round Table was sponsored by the Conference of European Churches (CEC), with the support of the Council of the European Bishops' Conference (CCEE). It brought together a variety of religious leaders from Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with a variety of religious leaders from other countries. From the territory of the former Yugoslavia, there were representatives from the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Muslim community, the Jewish community, the Hungarian Reformed Church, the Lutheran Church, the Baptist Church, the Pentecostal Church, and the Methodist Church. In addition, there were representatives from other churches in Europe, including Hungary, Britain, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, and Switzerland. Finally, Paul Wilson from the NCCUSA and myself represented the United States.

The representatives from the former Yugoslavia constituted a broader spectrum of people than had been part of earlier round-tables sponsored by CEC and other ecumenical and inter-faith organizations. Representatives included some representatives of the hierarchies as well as a number from the grass-root's leadership. Lay people as well as clergy were represented. Representation was rather imbalanced due to the fact that some delegations either would not or could not attend. For example, the Muslim delegation from Bosnia was unable to attend. Primarily this was due to problems related to gaining permission from the appropriate authorities for freedom of travel. However, there was also a demand by one Muslim leader for the release of a Bosnian Mufti as a condition for talking with Catholics. As a result of these problems, the Muslim delegation from Croatia refused to attend out of solidarity with their Muslim compatriots from Bosnia. This left only the Mufti of Belgrade to represent the Muslim community. In addition, the highest ranking invitee from the
Croatian Catholic Church, a Monsignor from Zagreb, did not attend. Since the conference, I have been told by Catholics in Zagreb that the reason was related to the fact that CEC has called for the lifting of sanctions on Serbia. It is obvious, therefore, that here could have been better representation. It is also clear to me that many issues were addressed very superficially or not at all. However, the very fact that these people met and were able to agree on some joint statements and measures of action was of tremendous significance.

At the beginning of the round-table, chairperson Jean Fischer, the General Secretary of CEC, presented four convictions which had resulted from previous round-tables and which he believed should provide a valid basis for this conversation: (1) this is not a religious war; (2) our concern is for moral and spiritual devastation; (3) it is our duty to hold onto hope through faith; and (4) efforts to solve this problem through arms has failed, necessitating work on reconciliation processes. I felt that the last three points provided an excellent basis for constructive conversation. However, I feel that the stating of the first point ran the risk of precluding the very important task of self-examination, confession, and repentance with regard to the roles played by each of the major religious traditions in fostering the kind of nationalistic extremism which has contributed so much to the origins of this conflict.

The introductions which followed served a number of very important roles. In addition to helping us put together names and faces, this introductory process served a storytelling role. For example, we learned of inter-religious prayer efforts and of the efforts of various religious groups to supply humanitarian aid. There were also some remarkable conciliatory statements. For example, Catholic Archbishop Perko of Belgrade commented that "Serbs do have legitimate interests" and Mufti Jusufspahic of Belgrade made tribute to the Serbian Orthodox Church for its efforts to "avoid religious conflict in Serbia." There were statements of recognition of the guilt on all sides, as indicated by the statement by Serbian Orthodox Bishop Hrizostom of Bihac that "Serbs, Muslims, and Croats have all suffered." There were hopeful examples of progress in peacemaking. For example, John Wood of LWF shared his knowledge of one small inter-ethnic community in Croatia in which Serbs and Croats had successfully relocated into their homes. There were signs of a spirit of repentance and a desire for a change of heart. For example, Serbian Orthodox Bishop Irinej of Novi Sad, Serbia, stated that, "We have to undergo transformation to reach peace" and Bishop Beredi, Lutheran Bishop of Novi Sad, stated that, "We have to start with ourselves." There were concrete suggestions made which, in the end, were accepted by the group as a whole. For example, Father Mataušić, head of the Franciscan Order in Croatia, suggested an independent information center and data bank.

These introductions took more time than had been planned. In part this was because of the depth of sharing. In part it was because the Serbian Orthodox delegation from Serbia and Bosnia did not arrive until the second day of the round table. After they were completed,
by mid-day on the second day of the round table, plans were adopted for the organization of three small discussion groups. For the next twenty-four hours, each of these groups discussed one of the following topics: (1) the protection of minorities and the provision of pastoral needs, (2) the promotion of truthful and reconciling information and the responsibility of the religious community for education in peace and reconciliation, and (3) cooperation among religious communities in relief and rehabilitation, joint prayers for peace, and a call for the lifting of sanctions.

Since I participated in group two, I will make more detailed comments on that discussion. Regarding availability and accuracy of information, it was noted that news from Serbian publications has been denied entry into many countries due to sanctions. There was also a consensus that much of the media coverage on all sides has been misleading, and some of it has been false. This was attributed to the fact that each society has allowed politicians to break the flow of communication between them. It was therefore agreed that the churches and other religious communities should take a leading role in rebuilding communication links. It was also agreed that, due to the preponderance of bad news in the public media, that the religious communities should make a special effort to disseminate good news stories. To accomplish all this, a number of things were decided: (1) to establish an joint information center; (2) to arrange an exchange of religious publications; and (3) to establish a direct line of communication, or hotline, between religious communities. Regarding education, the group discussed the question of religious education in the schools, the possibility of continuing dialogue between theological faculties, the establishment of a library of Christian peacemaking materials, and the utilization of experience and materials available through international religious peace organizations. Of these concerns, the group recommended the introduction in the schools of a "religious peace culture" which would focus on learning about various religious communities and create publications which would support such an education. The group also suggested developing connections with the various international religious peace organizations. These recommendations were adopted without significant revision by the full round-table in plenary session.

I shall report on groups one and three only by indicating the resulting reports as they were finally approved by the whole Round Table in plenary session. There were minor revisions made to the original report of group one and more substantive revisions made to the original report of group three. The adopted report of group one called for the following actions on the part of religious communities. With respect to the provision of pastoral needs, religious communities were encouraged to work together to help religious ministers to return to their believers and to give full support to ecumenical prayer groups, inter-religious prayer meetings, and attendance of each others' religious worship services. With respect to the rights of minorities in the present, religious leaders were encouraged to promote the
observance of existing international humanitarian law instruments and international provisions on the rights of minorities. With respect to the rights of minorities in the future, religious communities were encouraged to participate in the formulation and implementation of a charter that guarantees the rights of minorities within the constitutional framework of the states and to help their communities to understand the rights of minorities. In addition, there was a call for distribution, in the local languages, of reports on recent church consultations on human rights and a call for a follow-up Round Table for experts on the rights of minorities in the former Yugoslavia.

The adopted report of group three called for the following actions on the part of religious communities. General cooperation among religious communities should be deepened. More meetings should be held in order to pursue reconciliation. Joint ecumenical prayers for peace should be encouraged where they already exist, and such initiatives should be recommended in other places. Religious leaders should support the return of refugees to their homes by applying pressure upon the present authorities in the territories where refugees are to return and where possible to secure financial support in reconstruction. The humanitarian activities of religious communities should continue to be encouraged and supported. The relief should not be one-time initiatives of food and medicine, but should encompass the goods necessary for the beginning of a new life. The final recommendation of the group, a rather detailed statement calling for the lifting of sanctions on Serbia, led to the most heated debate of the Round Table and was finally not adopted in the full plenary session. This had been one of the prime concerns of the Serbian Orthodox delegation who cited the tremendous suffering of innocent people within their society. This was countered by a Croatian insistence that if the Round Table called for a lifting of sanctions, it would also have to call for action on other issues such as the return of Croatian sovereignty over occupied territory. It was finally accepted by Bishop Irinej that the Round Table could not demand the lifting of sanctions without also addressing numerous other political issues.

In addition to the adoption of group reports, the plenary made a joint statement titled "Inter-religious Cooperation for Peace and Justice." The process for formulation of this statement included a drafting committee consisting of each of the major parties represented—Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, and Protestant. The statement called upon governments and international organizations, such as the UN and the EC to do everything in their power to bring an end to war and to establish a just peace. It called upon all to try to lessen human suffering as experienced by separated families, prisoners of war, and missing persons. It questioned the ethics of sanctions (with the inclusion of a far less detailed statement than that suggested by group three). It rejected war as a way of solving problems and called for an end to the arms trade and war profiteering. It called for unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid and special protection for women, children, elderly, and all who
are especially vulnerable. It condemned forced emigration and expulsion of people and supported the right of refugees to return to their homes and reconstruct their lives. It called for freedom of movement as well as for the preservation of national and religious identity. It requested that spiritual workers be allowed to work in all areas and to visit damaged or destroyed places of worship. It condemned the manipulation of religious symbols and feelings for war aims and the destruction of holy places. The statement called upon members of the churches and religious communities to take responsibility for protection of human rights. It called upon them to support the cessation of hostilities and efforts at reconciliation and healing. It called upon all believers to assist materially and spiritually the victims of war, including those who have violated laws and war conventions. It condemned the use of human suffering to proselytize. It expressed the desire for this Round Table to continue to meet, if possible within the territory of the former Yugoslavia and with a widened circle of participants. Finally, it called upon members of the religious communities to pray and fast for the end of war and a lasting peace and to exemplify the truth that members of different communities could still live together in peace.

The kind of resolutions which come out of such meetings have, in my opinion, only minimal impact despite the fact that the chairperson asked each participant to defend this document in his/her home setting. I know others who attended the Round Table from Croatia who had similar minimal expectations from this process. This impression did not change, on my part or theirs. However, I believe that the process itself was extremely valuable. The need to come to agreement on a joint statement forced everyone present to search for common ground. The value has more to do with facilitation of internal process than with any external benefits.