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FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON DIALOGUE AMONG RELIGIONS AND CIVILIZATIONS IN MACEDONIA 2016

By Paul Mojzes

Paul Mojzes is professor emeritus of religious studies at Rosemont College and founder and editor of *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*. He was one of the originators of interreligious dialogue in Macedonia beginning in 2001 and has participated in all of the international dialogues in Macedonia. He is a member of the International Preparatory Committee of these dialogues.

The Fourth World Conference on Dialogue Among Religions and Civilization took place on November 3-5, 2017, in Bitola, Republic of Macedonia. As in the first three conferences, 2007 (Ohrid), 2010 (Ohrid), and 2013 (Skopje), there was acknowledgment of the inspiration for these conferences given by the late President of Macedonia, Boris Trajkovski, who had the foresight of the need for multireligious dialogue when his country was at a stage of low intensity civil war in 2001. On his initiative, an interreligious international dialogue (Jewish, Christian, Muslim) conference took place in Skopje in 2002, which introduced the practice of interreligious dialogue to Macedonia. Then he organized an international interreligious dialogue conference in Ohrid in 2003 to which he invited political leaders, including eight or nine heads of state of southeast European countries, and religious leaders as well as leading representatives from the cultural sphere. Soon thereafter, in 2004, he, along with some other members of his government, tragically died in an airplane incident in the mountains of Bosnia and Herzegovina. His death led to a massive increase of respect for him and his peacebuilding efforts that included engagement of domestic and international religious leaders. Subsequent governments of the Republic of Macedonia grasped the importance of Trajkovski's initiatives and undertook the role of organizing the triannual world conferences. The first three conferences were financially

supported by UNESCO and other sponsors. President Trajkovski's legacy is personified and kept in focus by the important participation of his wife Vilma and her brother Robert at all of these conferences.

The first conference in Ohrid in 2007 was very large with perhaps as many as 600 participants including a lot of additional personnel and staff (journalists, media, security, service personnel, drivers, and so forth). The second conference was reported in this publication in an article entitled, "Ohrid 2010: The Second World Conference on Inter-Religious and Inter-Civilization Dialogue" by James R. Payton Jr., Paul B. Mojzes.¹ That conference was attended by about 200 participants and auxiliary personnel and, like at the first, the Macedonian Muslims were active participants. But by the Third World Conference in 2013, it was noticeable that difficulties had emerged. Instead of meeting in Ohrid, the conference took place in Skopje to reduce the cost and time of transportation. Being in the capital city, it assured the participation of important government personnel (like in the previous two conferences both the President and Prime Minister of Macedonia attended and addressed the conference). But the length of the conference was abbreviated to two days and the Muslims of Macedonia boycotted the meeting, though no explanation for their absence was offered. Nevertheless, there was a considerable international component with participants from China, India, Arab countries, Africa, as well as Europe and North America. An announcement was made that in three years, another conference would follow.

The promise was kept but apparently with some difficulties. The formal theme of the fourth conference was "Migration and the Challenge of Integration Through Dialogue between

¹ James R. Payton, Jr. and Paul B. Mojzes, (2010) "Ohrid 2010: The Second World Conference on Inter-Religious and Inter-Civilization Dialogue," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. XXX: No. 4, Article 4. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol30/iss4/4>. The article contains an overview of interreligious dialogues in Macedonia from 2001 to 2010.

Religions and Cultures.” It took place in Bitola, an important ancient city in Southwest Macedonia near the Greek border. The conference continued to be under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture (Elizabeta Kancheska-Milevska, minister) with the assistance of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups (Valentina Bozinovska, director, who was also the Conference Chairperson) and UNESCO. Macedonia’s President Gjorge Ivanov also addressed the conference, but absent were the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister as were prominent religious leaders, like cardinals and metropolitan bishops who had previously attended in significant numbers (Even Archbishop Stefan, the primate of the Macedonian Orthodox Church was absent.) The conference was officially addressed by Macedonian Orthodox Metropolitan Bishop Petar of the Diocese of Prilep and Pelagonia, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Skopje, Kiro Stojanov, Rev. Wilfred Nausner, Superintendent of the Evangelical Methodist Church of Macedonia, and Ms. Berta Romano Nikolić, President of the Jewish Community of Macedonia. Representatives of the Islamic Community of Macedonia did not participate.² The official languages of the conference were reduced from the original six to two, Macedonian and English.

An unspoken factor at the conference was the political unrest in the country not only due to continued unsolved antagonisms between ethnic Slavic Macedonians and ethnic Albanian Macedonians but also frequent demonstration against the governing “Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity,” the “Social Democratic Union of Macedonia” and the two smaller ethnic Albanian parties, “Democratic Union for Integration” and “Democratic Party of Albanians” (additionally there are other minor

² Unofficially, I heard that the reason for their absence is a conflict between the Islamic Community and/or ethnic Albanian political parties and the government of Macedonia (possibly over non-issuance of building permits for some mosques). In my personal opinion, this is counterproductive because if the Islamic Community of Macedonia would raise their grievances in an international forum like this conference, they would possibly gain a wider circle of supporters and exert public pressure on the authorities.

political parties). Charges of corruption have been levelled against various government officials, which naturally, create a climate of suspicion and lack of enthusiasm.

The program was carried out in two formats. There were three plenary sessions on the main topic of the conference. In addition, there were panel sessions, one on the theme “The Family—A Fundamental Source and Place for Human Dignity and the Growth of Faith” and the other “Use and Misuse of Modern Means of Electronic Communications and Social Networks (Religious Orientation)”. Additionally, there was also a forum of the UNESCO professorial chairs, “The Views of the UNESCO Chairs from SEE to Migration, Refugees Crises and Terrorism as Challenges for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue.” As the number of participants was smaller (lacking official count, I estimate about 50 international participants and 50 domestic ones), this meant that the speeches were fewer, usually 15 to 20 minutes long for keynote speakers and five to seven minutes long for others. A novelty was that the time restrictions were voluntarily observed by the speakers and that for the first time in these conferences, there was also time left for some real give-and-take discussion between participants, hence not only delivering monologues about dialogue but actually engaging in direct exchanges among participants—something that the International Preparatory Committee and others had advocated. As is customarily the case, the quality of the contributions varied widely, some being scholarly analyses and others well-meant generalized endorsements of the importance of interreligious and intercivilizational dialogue and cooperation to deal with the challenges of the unprecedented migrations from Asia and Africa to Europe, often specifically across the Balkan countries, which have only recently come out of wars themselves. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all speakers stated that religious communities throughout history have experienced their own and other people’s migrations and have always urged hospitality to strangers and migrants. At least

one social scientist, “East-West Bridge” President, Jovan Kovačić, of Belgrade, Serbia, presented a fact-based warning of impending conflicts in the near future caused by multiplication of wars, the widening gap between the rich and poor individuals and nations, and the migration-caused turbulence for both the migrants and host communities, leading to religious extremism among migrants and right-wing populism in host countries. According to Kovačić, fundamentalism is not found only in Islam but in all religions, and it is the task of the clergy of these religious communities to work with each other in order to find ways to bring more effective integration and mutual appreciation of this diversity.³

In addition to the formal scholarly and religious dialogues, there was an exhibition “Mother Theresa—Saint from Skopje, Saint of the World.” Mother Theresa of Calcutta as she is better known (born Teresa Bojaxhiu, 1910-1997) was canonized in Rome on September 4, 2016, much to the delight of not only Albanians in Macedonia and Albania but by all Macedonians. There were also visits to the archaeological excavation of ancient Heraclia Lyncestis, as well as sightseeing of the Old Town Bitola (formerly known as Monastir in Ottoman times).

As the travel subsidies for foreign participants dwindled, the number of international guests was significantly reduced. Only two Americans attended: Mohammad Latif and the author—by coincidence both immigrants, apparently not selected for that reason but nevertheless symptomatic of the impact of migrations in the contemporary world. Both were co-moderators of separate sessions along with Macedonian chairpersons.

As is the custom at these conferences, a declaration was adopted after some revisions and discussion.⁴ The organizers announced the creation of an International Preparatory Committee for the next conference in 2019. Hopefully, the dedication to continue these conferences will not

³ Jovan Kovačić’s speech, “Vital Role of Religion in the Calamitous World of Today” is published below in this issue of OPREE.

⁴ The Declaration is also published in this issue.

wane and funds for their financing will not vanish as these conferences, despite some inadequacies, nevertheless keep interreligious dialogue alive in this part of the world where it is not a natural part of the culture of dealing with conflict. Amazingly, some religious communities have assisted the migrants in their drive from Asia and Africa westward to the affluent countries of Europe. They have shared of their own scant resources in remarkable ways. The title and content of this conference reflects the desire by these countries and religious communities not only to avoid being overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of migrants, but also to find constructive ways of integrating them into European societies.