

Towards a Culture of Peace: Remarks on the Religious Aspects of the War in Bosnia and Croatia*

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On 10 and 11 September 1994 Pope John Paul II visited Croatia. His planned visit to Sarajevo on 8 September unfortunately had to be cancelled at the last minute on advice from the UN. It was not possible, therefore, for the pope to express his solidarity with the population of this besieged city and the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina by means of a personal visit. The postponement of the papal visit was a huge disappointment for everyone who is concerned for the survival of Bosnia-Herzegovina. It was quite obvious who was opposed to this visit and why: the leader of the Bosnian Serbs had uttered threats, in familiar style laying advance blame on the Muslim community in Bosnia for any terrorist attack on the pope's life.

Notwithstanding this major disappointment the papal visit to Croatia was of the utmost importance. To grasp its significance one has to know something about the long debates in Yugoslav society in the 1980s about an eventual visit of the pope to Yugoslavia. 'The time is not ripe yet' was the standard answer from the secular authorities to the Roman Catholic Church, which longed for such a visit to take place. Obstacles from the point of view of the authorities included: the wounds of the Second World War; the polemics on the Jasenovac concentration camp; the Stepinac case; the fear that (as in Poland) the visit could have undesired political effects by stimulating national feelings, this time on the part of the Croats; and continuing tension between church and state on national and human rights issues. Those in power obviously also thought that such a visit could have a destabilising effect on the country. It was only after the recognition of an independent Croatian state that a papal visit to Croatia became a realistic option.

There is no doubt that Pope John Paul II had wanted to go to Belgrade as well as Zagreb and Sarajevo and to visit the Serbian Orthodox Church. In the previous year the patriarchs of Constantinople and Moscow had both been in Belgrade. A meeting there between the pope and the leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church would have underlined that as far as the Holy See is concerned the improvement of ecumenical relations with the Orthodox has top priority. It is a well-known fact that the Orthodox churches, especially in Russia and Serbia, are very displeased with Vatican policy towards what they see very clearly as 'Orthodox nations and territories'. Accusations of proselytisation have become obstacles to the official theological dialogue between these churches which started in 1980. The Holy See is very anxious to convince the

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Orthodox churches of its ecumenical intentions; but it was the Serbian Orthodox Church which officially declared that it did not want to receive the pope in Belgrade.

The Vatican has continually encouraged the Catholic Church in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to take part in as many ecumenical encounters as possible organised by the WCC, the CEC and other bodies. During the war meetings were held in 1991, 1992, 1993 and 1994. These included not only meetings of bishops but encounters between priests, theologians and lay people. Most of the meetings took place abroad (Switzerland and Hungary), but during the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, held each January, there have been meetings in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. It was a hopeful sign that the Orthodox priest Milenko Popović was present at a celebration in Zagreb cathedral together with representatives of the other Christian confessions and other religions in January 1994; but such examples of participation by the Serbian Orthodox Church are unfortunately rare. The latest and probably most significant meeting took place on 17 and 18 May 1994 at the airport in Sarajevo between an Orthodox delegation led by the Russian patriarch Aleksii II and the Serbian patriarch Pavle and a Catholic delegation led by Cardinal Kuharić and the archbishop of Vrhbosna (Sarajevo), Mgr Puljić. The Islamic community, however, refused to take part in a meeting with Patriarch Pavle, for two reasons. Firstly, *reis ul ulema* Mustafa Cerić demanded that the meeting take place on territory under the control of the Bosnian government, and the airport is under UN control. Secondly, Cerić demanded that the Serbian patriarch and the Serbian Orthodox Church condemn the crimes of the Serbian army in Bosnia-Herzegovina. After the meeting Cardinal Kuharić and his delegation went to Sarajevo for a meeting with the *reis ul ulema* to inform him about it. The Russian and Serbian delegation used the opportunity of the Sarajevo summit for a short meeting with Karadžić at his headquarters in Pale.

Over the past few years serious efforts have been made by delegates of the Roman Catholic Church to organise a meeting between Patriarch Pavle and Pope John Paul II. In April 1993 a delegation of the Serbian Orthodox Church paid a historic visit to Rome. Speculations about an improvement in relations and a possible meeting between pope and patriarch did not last very long, however. At a press conference immediately after their visit, Serbian bishops Amfilohije and Irinej attacked Vatican policy towards Yugoslavia, and in particular Vatican recognition of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Several months earlier, Serbian patriarch Pavle had turned down the pope's invitation to take part in ecumenical prayers for peace at Assisi on 9 January – an occasion graced by the presence of former *reis ul ulema* Jakub Selimoski from Sarajevo.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church did not want the pope to come to Belgrade or to visit Bosnia-Herzegovina. The reason for the Serbian bishops' negative attitude towards Vatican policy is simply political. They regard the Vatican as sharing responsibility for the breakup of Yugoslavia, because of the recognition of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

At the start of this conflict there was a widespread view in the world at large that all sides were blindly fanatical and nationalistic and that all the religious communities were alike. I would like to draw attention to the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has in fact done a great deal, both internationally and in the former Yugoslav region, to serve the cause of peace and justice. The major problem as far as relations between religious denominations in the Balkan peninsula are concerned is that up to now the Orthodox Church has not understood, or has not wanted to understand, that it has to abandon some fundamentalist ethnic attitudes. I want to argue that the

official political statements which the Serbian Orthodox Church has issued over the past seven years are not the essence of Orthodoxy. The current ecumenical task is to get the Orthodox Church out of its self-chosen territorial ghetto, its self-chosen prison of frustration. I would like to discuss the 'culture of peace' as described by the pope on his visit to Croatia. Such a culture is not possible, however, without the liberation of the Orthodox Church from within the narrow walls of national-religious concepts.

Firstly, I will explain what the pope's message was on his latest visit to the Balkans. Secondly, I will explain the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church as set out in the appeal of 5 July 1994 from the Synod to the Serbian nation and the world at large. Thirdly, I will speak about what needs to be done to bridge the wide gap between these positions, and whether the task is possible.

The message of Pope John Paul II was essentially that peace in the Balkan peninsula is not a utopia. He spoke of the thousands of unbreakable ties between the different peoples and the similarity of the languages. From the geographical position of the Balkans as an area of trade and communication he extrapolated a future in terms of peace and cooperation. His plea to Catholic, Orthodox and Islamic believers was oriented towards reconciliation, and he based his appeal for reconciliation on the unity which all human beings share and which is more fundamental than any sense of belonging to a smaller unit, such as a nation. 'Would it not be an intolerable hypocrisy,' he asked, 'to repeat the Lord's prayer while at the same time harbouring feelings of anger and envy or even intentions of violence and revenge?' A clear theme in his message was that the task of peacemaking and reconciliation is a task for the whole ecclesial community.

A second theme in the pope's message was his wholehearted approval for the record of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina – and not so much its record of endurance over the past 70 years, but rather its record in keeping faith alive. In several public addresses the pope spoke in favourable terms about Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac, the former archbishop of Zagreb. At a meeting with priests, religious, seminarians and nuns he said that

The most prestigious figure is, however, Cardinal Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac. In his life, work, courage and patience, in his silence, and finally in his death he showed himself a true man of the church, ready for extreme sacrifice in order not to deny the faith. In every circumstance, in freedom, in prison or political confinement, he was always vigilant as a true pastor of his flock; and when he understood that the political parties intended to divide the clergy and separate the People of God from the Church of Rome he did not hesitate to oppose them with all his might, paying for his courage with imprisonment.

At a general audience after his return to Rome he again spoke about Stepinac, praising him as 'an eminent figure of the church in Croatia who with his great courage gave witness of his faithfulness to the Gospel and his loyalty to the Holy See, together with others'.

In a speech at Zagreb airport just before his departure for Rome the pope expressed his support for the successor states of Yugoslavia. Each of the republics within the Yugoslav federation, he said, had a right to sovereignty, and that right could not be denied by the international community. There could be no justification for war in the Balkans, therefore. Obviously the Serbian Orthodox position on this issue, as put forward by the Holy Synod, differs radically from that of the pope, and indeed from that

of the UN on recognition of the successor states.

The pope also repeatedly condemned ethnic cleansing of the civil population, be they Muslims, Croats or Serbs, from parts of Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia.

The Catholics of Croatia were obviously very pleased with this visit. Cardinal Kuharić recently called it 'the most illuminating event in the history of the Church in Croatia'. The comments of neutral observers were also largely positive. The visit was a dignified celebration, and it seems to have brought home to observers the fact that the Catholic faith in Croatia is more than national folklore.

The Catholic community took the pope's appeal to work for reconciliation and peace very seriously, and Catholics are likely to work for justice for refugees and displaced persons of all kinds. So are the Muslims in Bosnia, Sandžak and Kosovo, who have a respect and understanding for the religious, moral and political position of the Holy See. The problem is primarily with the Serbian Orthodox Church, which has shown no understanding for the position of the non-Orthodox religious communities, nor for the non-Serbian national communities, nor for the principles of international law as they are interpreted by the international community. Sympathy for the Serbian Orthodox Church is decreasing day by day in the Balkan peninsula and in Europe as a whole.

What is, then, the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the present war? From the very start it has, in fact, been very clear about its position. It seems to me that the problem has been that the European ecumenical organisations have not taken seriously the Orthodox Church's stated understanding of international and interreligious relations in the Balkans. It has taken several years since the outbreak of the war for the WCC, the CEC, sister churches and other observers to come to the conclusion that the Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church has all the time been deadly serious in its declarations about Catholics and Croats, about Islam in Bosnia and Kosovo, and about Serbian national and religious history and identity. Over this period the geographical, cultural and psychological gap between Western and Central Europe on the one hand and Orthodoxy in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe on the other has grown wider. The function of Orthodoxy in this process has unfortunately not been that of a creative principle of renewal and reconciliation but that of an idea and an institution mobilising frustration.

On 5 July 1994 the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church adopted an *Appeal to the Serbian Nation and World Public* which clearly explained the bishops' position. The appeal provoked widespread protest from other European churches bewildered by a statement in which the Synod rejected the peace proposal of the Contact Group and took sides with the leadership of the Bosnian Serbs. It led to a debate on whether the Serbian Orthodox Church should be suspended from membership of the international ecumenical movement.

The appeal begins with reference to the significance of the Church in the history and identity of the nation. The bishops recall the period of Turkish rule and fascist occupation during the Second World War, and comment that now is not the first time that the Church and the nation have been in great danger. There follows a sentence which has been quoted very frequently in the international media (and which I quote from the official English version of the text):

We consciously and responsibly proclaim that we would rather agree not to live, than to be traitors to our People and to wash our hands of its fate of today and tomorrow, having spiritually led it for centuries on the Cross-bearing path of Christ.

I personally take this sentence very seriously. This is not merely rhetoric. The sentiment reflects the way religious and national traditions are cultivated in the Serbian church. It is a renewal of the Kosovo oath of 1389, when according to legend Prince Lazar chose the Kingdom of Heaven rather than the Kingdom of Earth and chose to die in battle against the Turkish army. The German Slavic scholar Reinhard Lauer has written several impressive essays on the cultivation of myths about national heroes in the Serbian tradition. His term 'Das Wüten der Mythen', which might be translated as 'raging myths', is quite appropriate to characterise the process whereby Serbian national consciousness has been revitalised since 1987.

The bishops' appeal goes on to explain that the Serbs are only defending what for centuries has been their own territory, and that this includes the Serbs in Bosnia and Croatia, who, claim the bishops, were in the right when they resisted independence for those republics and when they turned down the Vance–Owen plan for Bosnia and the latest peace proposal of the Contact Group. The refusal of those Serbs to accept the peace proposals was based on the presence of silent witnesses to their religious and national history: the Serbian monasteries, churches and graves in territories which according to the latest peace proposal would not be under Serbian rule but under that of the Bosnian government. The cogency of this argument is undermined by the deliberate devastation of the Muslim religious heritage in territories under Serbian control—the mosques of Foča and Banja Luka, for instance. The Serbian Church cannot conceive of an independent multinational or multicultural Bosnian state ruled on the basis of equality amongst the national communities. Dispute amongst Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian Muslim politicians and ideologists over the future of Bosnia in fact began after the Berlin Congress of 1878, and has not yet reached a conclusion.

The Serbian bishops believe that the Serbs in Bosnia and Croatia have justifiable grounds for war. Their appeal includes what can only be construed as a call to battle:

With full responsibility before God and before our People and human history, we call the entire Serbian Nation to stand up in defence of their centuries-long rights and liberties, of their vital interests, necessary for physical and spiritual survival and right to remain in the land of their fathers and grandfathers.

In conclusion, the appeal urges western politicians, especially those of Europe and America, to respect the rights of the Serbian nation and 'not to force violent solutions and decisions on the Serbian People'.

The position adopted by the Serbian Orthodox Church is obviously closer to that of Karadžić than that of Milošević. In an official statement of 10 August 1994 the Synod voiced severe criticism of the sanctions placed on the Bosnian Serbs by the Milošević regime. The sanctions had been welcomed by the international community and this had led to the gradual lifting of sanctions against Serbia and Montenegro themselves. The bishops, however, saw sanctions as a form of treason against the national cause, as their quotation from the poem by Njegoš out of his Kosovo cycle makes clear.

In August Bishop Rolf Koppe, responsible for ecumenical affairs in the Protestant Church in Germany, sent a very clear challenge to Patriarch Pavle.

The appeal of 5 July 1994 places great emphasis ... on the link between nation and religion. The bloody conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina is thereby endowed with the character of a religious war ... On 5 July you call on the

Serbian people to resist, and explain that not human but only divine justice is what matters to you. At the same time, however, you make it clear that God's justice and Serbian demands coincide. We can only understand the appeal as justification of territories won in recent violent conflicts. This would mean that you – despite your repeated assertions to the contrary – you are also legitimising the war in the region, with all its shocking crimes and brutalities ... If this is the case, then the Serbian Orthodox Church has placed itself outside the common ground shared by the ecumenical community of churches.

Before the publication of the July appeal the WCC had refrained from public criticism of the Serbian Orthodox Church. At its meeting on 22 September, however, the Executive Committee of the WCC decided for the first time publicly to challenge the church 'about its responsibility for acting as a peacemaker'.

The establishment of a culture of peace in the Balkan peninsula will not be possible without the Serbian Orthodox Church and without the Bosnian Serbs – who are, of course, not to be identified fully with the Bosnian Serb leadership. If it proves impossible to liberate the Serbian Orthodox Church from its self-chosen ghetto of blood and territory, the consequences for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue understood as support for peace and justice will be far-reaching. The only alternative would be to suspend the Serbian Orthodox Church from membership of international ecumenical organisations such as the WCC. This would mean a crisis within the ecumenical movement itself, because the autocephalous Orthodox churches would never agree to such a suspension: according to the constitution of the WCC, suspension of a member church is not technically possible.

For the sake of the future of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, then, a solution has to be found very quickly. First of all it should be clear that the conflict in the Balkans is primarily of a political nature. It is not a religious war, although elements of the religious traditions are used, or rather abused, by the various sides. In a broader sense the main issue is the very complex relationship between religion and modernity. In order to understand Balkan history over the last two centuries one has to focus on the often very painful and only partially implemented modernisation process. Here I would refer the reader to the outstanding work by Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans* (2 volumes, Cambridge University Press, 1993) in which she analyses the modernisation process in politics, economics and culture from the eighteenth century, and also to the book by Ivo Banač, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1984). The problem of the Serbian Orthodox Church lies precisely in its complex relation to modernity.

The Church has a retrospective vision of the Serbian nation. According to the Church the nation was established as a political and cultural entity by the dynasty of Stefan Nemanja in the twelfth century. The Church thinks in medieval terms: it does not see that today's nations are the result of a long historical process that culminated only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it gave full support to the liberation struggle of the Serbian nation and state it did not see this struggle as part of a modernisation process involving the whole of Europe but as the resurrection of the medieval Serbian kingdom. At no point has the church shown understanding of the desire for self-determination on the part of other nationalities in the Balkans, especially the Albanians, Macedonians and Bosnian Muslims.

While the Serbian Orthodox Church supported the new political structures and the

modernisation process in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then, at the same time its religious and theological traditions meant that it would in fact be strongly opposed to the outcome of that modernisation process inasmuch as it involved both a modern way of life with a loss of traditional national and religious values and also the emergence of new national groups with their own political demands and their own national identities, which could not be integrated in the Serbian national-religious corpus.

It is both necessary and still possible for the Serbian Orthodox Church to accept the dynamic of the modernisation process, involving the process of reorganisation and restructuring of the institutions of state and society and the recognition of the existence of younger nations. It is necessary because otherwise Serbian Orthodoxy will lose the spiritual truth it possesses and will become a mere national ideology which will not endure. That it is still possible is largely thanks to the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue of the last 30 years, in which Orthodoxy has been involved, but which has far deeper roots. It is a misconception on the part of the Serbian Orthodox Church to think that the Roman Catholic Church or the Protestant churches both internationally and in the Balkan region would not be able to demonstrate a positive understanding of and attitude towards Orthodoxy. The seventeenth-century theologians Mark Antum de Dominis and Juraj Križanić were already speaking out for reconciliation and mutual acceptance. The tradition continued in the nineteenth century among the theologians and priests around Bishop Juraj Strossmayer, and in the twentieth century among those who have tried to implement the ecumenical renewal recommended by the Second Vatican Council, such as Šagi-Bunić, Turčinović, Golub and others.

In these days of continually renewed violence against civilians in which a religious element always seems to be involved it may seem naïve to argue that reconciliation is possible. I am convinced, however, that if the religious institutions and traditions involved are prepared to trust in the strength of the faith of the Fathers of the Church they will be able to find their way towards reconciliation.