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## Conference Report

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# The role of religions in the search for peace

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

In a world shattered by economic breakdown and ensuing social dislocation, famine, and wars, political institutions have had their mettle tested, and most have failed miserably. Be it in post-1989 eastern Europe, the Balkans, or the Third World, political institutions invested with the responsibility to promote the interests of society have by and large failed to provide solutions to the crises threatening the very continued existence of their nations and populations.

In this political vacuum, religion has come to occupy an increasingly prominent position. Precisely what role religion should have in the current strategic juncture was the topic of debate among leading figures representing the world's major religions who gathered in Milan, Italy on Sept. 19-22. The conference, entitled "Earth of Men, Invocation to God," was the Seventh International Meeting for Peace organized by the Italian lay organization Community of St. Egidio. It represented the continuation of a discussion process promoted by Pope John Paul II, which began with a day of prayer in Assisi in 1986.

None of the debate was academic, nor could it be, considering that the conference opened in the wake of the mutual recognition of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, continued as the news of a communist victory in the Polish elections hit, while the war raged in Bosnia-Herzegovina and David Owen seemed on the brink of effecting the partition of Bosnia, and concluded the same day that Boris Yeltsin engineered his preemptive coup in Moscow. Thus, the round table discussions dedicated to such themes as "Israel between Universalism and Nation," "Religions and Balkan Conflicts," "Islam and the Modern World," and "From Eastern Europe: Questions to the Churches," thrashed out issues of immediate relevance.

Two main currents of thought emerged from the conference: a one-worldist vision of global government, imbued with religious feeling directed toward establishing a malthusian harmony between man and nature; and, a truly ecumenical dialogue predicated on the highest universal principles pervading the great religions, oriented toward establishing peace, based on economic and social justice.

### One-world malthusianism

Mikhail Gorbachov, speaking as the president of the foundation bearing his name as well as of the Green Cross over which he presides, delivered a keynote address at the gala opening at the famous La Scala opera house. In what one Italian newspaper called "the encyclical of Gorbachov," the former U.S.S.R. President inveighed against the "secularization of society," and proposed that values reflected in religions be mobilized to guarantee the "survival of humanity and the whole ecosystem." He railed against the "development without return of the technical sphere, which destroys nature, including man, and ending up in the so-called 'demographic explosion,' beginning with the insatiable thirst for consumption." Calling for a "radical intellectual renewal, a moral purification," he hammered away at the notion that "technological civilization, after having juxtaposed man to his natural environment, has exhausted its potential" and "has become a prevalently destructive force." Therefore, "No longer sovereignty over nature, but harmony with nature must, from today on, become absolute law."

The form in which this new world dictatorship should emerge, according to the man who oversaw the delivery of his nation into the malthusian clutches of the International Monetary Fund, is that of "renewal of the instruments of interaction among states, beginning with the U.N.O. [United Nations Organization] and regional organisms, like the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe." These institutions, he said, must be "perfected" through radical revision of law. "The entire corpus of international law must be reviewed. . . . Even such 'hot' problems as the relationship between the sovereignty of states and the guarantee of universal human rights, of rights of peoples, of minorities, do not yet have just juridical norms universally recognized." Gorbachov proposed that such norms be drawn up and made binding for the whole world.

### Peace through technological progress

Although echoes of Gorbachov's radical one-world malthusianism could be heard reverberating here and there in the

conference, his message was, fortunately, not the one that dominated the proceedings. Particularly among the high-ranking church figures from the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe, one felt his very presence was not embraced with excessive warmth. Whereas Gorbachov proceeded from a quasi-masonic notion of "religiosity" which allocates belief to the other-worldly realm of the mystical, most of the authoritative voices heard appealed for understanding among peoples and nations on the basis of a principled, ecumenical agreement to safeguard human society in its lawful struggle for progress. Italian lay figures juxtaposed to Gorbachov's malthusian nightmare, a vision of peace through technological progress.

The conference brought together 350 religious leaders from the world's major faiths, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Tenri Kyo, Rissho Kosei-Kai, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and Mandeism. Major attention was directed toward ecumenical understanding among the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The most illustrious representative of Judaism at the conference was the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Israel Meir Lau, who, after intervening in Milan, flew to Rome for a meeting with Pope John Paul II, the first such encounter in history at the Vatican. Rabbi Lau's approach to the need for common action among the monotheistic religions was pragmatic. After citing a passage from the prophet Isaiah, who projects the vision of universal peace, in which the "wolf lives with the lamb, and the leopard with the child," he said, however, that "our generation will not have the privilege of living in the epoch prophesied by Isaiah." Rather, today's world, he said, is more akin to that of Noah, who succeeded in bringing animals of different types to live together peacefully on the ark, by virtue of the fact that they had a common enemy, the flood. Today, the rabbi continued, echoing certain strains in Gorbachov's speech, the common enemy is to be found in "want, cancer, AIDS, drugs, nuclear weapons, ignorance, and the rejection of religious faith." Thus, he called for men to lay down their lances and take up the plow, to "mobilize the resources of humanity for a common war against the enemies which threaten it."

### **Judaism and the nation**

The conceptual problem tackled by Jewish speakers at a round table on "Israel between Universalism and Nation" was theological and philosophical in nature, but charged with political implications. Is Judaism the "universal religion" whose laws are binding on all humanity, as Grand Rabbi René Samuel Sirat, president of the Permanent Council of the Conference of European Rabbis, seemed to imply? Or is Judaism a religion, distinct from the nation, which shares with other religions certain universal principles? University of South Florida Prof. Jacob Neusner, who cited St. Paul's

"distinction between Israel after the flesh" (ethnic Israel) and "Israel after the promise" (the community of believers), seemed to promote the latter idea. Yet he, like the keynote speaker of the session, Rabbi David Rosen, director of the Religious Affairs Department of the Anti-Defamation League in Israel, left the question hanging.

Indeed the issue of the sovereign nation-state wriggled like a live fish being tossed from hand to hand in the conference. What made it particularly slippery was the controversy regarding the status of Jerusalem, considered a holy city by the three monotheistic religions. In a press conference, Rabbi Lau tried to dismiss Christians' and Muslims' claims, saying that the former had Rome as their holy city and the latter, Mecca. In response to proposals, such as the one authored by the Vatican, for Jerusalem to have an international status, he was explicit: "Go and ask the Americans to make Washington an international city, or the Muslims to make Mecca an international city." Announcing that he would reiterate Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres's invitation to the pope to visit Jerusalem, he said that the image of the pontiff's arrival in "the eternal city of Jerusalem, the capital of Israel" would do much to contribute to eliminating anti-Semitism in the world.

The status of Jerusalem is a highly complicated, charged issue. Prof. Mohamed Esslimani from Algeria expressed his view in a press conference that an international status for the city might be a starting point for breaking the deadlock. Professor Riccardi, president of the host organization, floated the proposal in his opening remarks, that the Community of St. Egidio might organize its next meeting "next year in Jerusalem," a proposal which Rabbi Lau later accepted. Cardinal Martini, the archbishop of Milan, also announced that he would visit Jerusalem in February, presumably to prepare a papal visit later in the year. One significant reference by Rabbi Lau was his insistence, during the press conference, that the conflict which has raged in the Middle East for decades is political, not religious. He also pointed to historical Andalusia as the "best period for the Jewish diaspora and perhaps the best moment for all of Europe . . . the golden era." That was a period in which Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted in a flourishing society.

### **Loyalty to the nation-state**

The spirit of loyalty to the nation-state, regardless of religious affiliation, dominated the encounter among religious leaders of war-torn Bosnia in a round table discussion on "Religion in the Balkan Conflict." Trifunovic Laurentije, bishop of Sabac-Valjevo, was present as the official representative of the Orthodox Patriarch of Serbia, together with the Catholic Archbishop of Sarajevo Vinko Puljic, the Auxiliary Bishop of Zagreb Djuro Kokša, the Archbishop of Tirana Anastasio Yannolatos, and the Grand Mufti of Sarajevo Jacub Selimoski. In the course of the session, the Catholic,

Muslim, and Serb Orthodox leaders joined in an embrace which attested to their conviction that the war is not religious in origin. Bishop Laurentije, who issued a call to soldiers to lay down their arms, expressed his "hope that the religions may exercise a decisive influence in the peace process."

Monsignor Puljic (who had been forced to use a tank to reach the Sarajevo airport) expressed doubts that Serbian soldiers would heed that call, given that they are not Christians, but atheistic communists. He launched a plea for preserving the unity of Bosnia-Herzegovina, denouncing the Owen-Stoltenberg plan for partition. "The province of Sarajevo," he said, "is 110 years old on the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is a historic territory, where three peoples live, not an artificial creation like Yugoslavia. In the name of the Catholic Church," he said, "I call for this ecclesiastical province to be kept united, and invite political leaders to consider this." His plea for national unity was seconded in no less uncertain terms by the grand mufti, who said, "We cannot divide the territory. Aggression was launched, ethnic cleansing was carried out, and this cannot be accepted. There is *one* Bosnia, within which there is respect for all peoples."

No less poignant was the discussion on the fate of the nation-states of eastern Europe, liberated in the revolutionary wave beginning in 1989, and handed over to the vultures of the free market—what Cardinal Jozef Glemp of Poland called the "negative effects of a savage capitalism"—for looting and destruction. The round tables dedicated to this theme, "Eastern Europe: Questions to the Church" and "Ukraine and the Christian Churches," witnessed a painful soul-searching on the part of the religious leaders participating, who tended to treat the catastrophe which has befallen their peoples as *their* responsibility. In certain cases, such as that of Bulgaria, the responsibility of the Orthodox Church in failing to interpret and support the democratic aspirations of the people was rightly criticized. Stoyan Ganev, president of the General Assembly of the U.N. and former deputy prime minister and foreign minister, attacked that faction of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church which maintained its historically close relations with the communist power structure even after 1988, rather than providing the support for democratic reform demanded by the population. In a speech which stood out for its frankness, Ganev charged that the political institution in Bulgaria that had placed greatest emphasis on "orthodoxy" as an identity for the people had been the old communist party, re-baptized the Socialist Party. This was done, he said, not to imbue the population with religious values, but rather to provide an "orthodox" identity which would "isolate Bulgaria from western Europe and from its values."

More than any other speaker at the round table, Ganev, who founded a Christian Democratic party in Bulgaria in hopes of promoting Christian values, put his finger on the central point: "Bulgaria is a part of Europe," he stressed, "not

part of the post-communist family, which doesn't exist, but which some want to re-create." He urged greater economic, cultural, and political integration of Bulgaria into Europe. He stressed as well the crucial role Bulgaria could have, as a part of western Europe, in reinforcing contacts among all Christian forces, in order to prevent the Serbian war against Bosnian from expanding into an all-Balkans war.

As could be expected, the representatives of the Russian and Bulgarian Orthodox churches did not reply directly to his charges. Msgr. Miloslav Vlk, Catholic archbishop of Prague and president of the European Bishops Council, added to Ganev's observations, by recounting how the communist regime in his country had worked to prevent the unity of non-communists, fomenting precisely this kind of division within the church. Interestingly, he also noted that the communists, by bandying about the slogans of "solidarity" and "peace" over the decades, had emptied these words of their true meaning, such that the people could not take them seriously. He, too, issued a plea for overcoming obstacles to cooperation in Europe.

### Grappling with the symptoms

Although Ganev came close to it, no one in the discussions explicitly identified the nature of evil which has been the cause of suffering among peoples of different religious persuasions, whether in the Middle East, eastern Europe, or the developing sector (which also was treated in several round table debates). Geopolitics, neo-colonialism, the role of the British, in particular, in fomenting decades of Middle East conflict, in stimulating wars along "religious" lines, for example, between Muslims and Hindus on the Indian subcontinent, or in dashing the hopes of newly liberated eastern European republics for economic justice and true liberty, were, unfortunately, not on the official agenda. Nor was the dimension of economics introduced as an integral part of the peace process in any of these troubled areas. Speakers dealt with the social and spiritual *effects* of economic looting against their people, grappling with the symptoms of a disease, but without ever identifying the cause.

His Excellency Pangratios Majdanski Vsevolod, the bishop of Skoelos, Ukraine and representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, attacked "western materialism" with its "television programs which frustrate people with their inaccessible consumer goods"; he denounced "secularism," which is "making its terrible entrance into all aspects of the population; pornography and drugs are phenomena that are increasingly widespread."

But while accurately depicting the phenomena of social degeneration, most religious leaders seemed helpless in grasping the economic or philosophical or political causes for the evils afflicting their flock. By remaining at the descriptive level, one could only fall prey to the kind of argumentation presented by Gorbachov at the beginning of the conference:

that "modern technology" has brought us to this pass, nationalism has created wars, and the way out must be a return to a mythical pre-industrial state, under one spiritual world umbrella.

### Economic growth is vital

One forum, however, did focus on the crucial economic dimension, and forcefully so, in terms that challenged the parameters of Gorbachov's ecologism. The round table on "Economics, Religion and Ethics" brought together mainly industrial personalities, one of whom hit the nail on the head.

Bruno Musso, industrial magnate of the Italian Ansaldo group, posed the question of world crisis in economic terms. Denouncing free market economics for having "satisfied the growth of one-fifth of humanity, while four-fifths remain in a situation of serious underdevelopment," he posed the question: "Can this market economy guide a balanced development of humanity?" He stated unequivocally: "I am not a neo-malthusian, I do not believe in zero growth, I am deeply convinced that resources should be managed carefully, but I do not believe that this involves an idolatry of the ecosystem, to be safeguarded at all costs." Musso denounced those who would attack development as pernicious, saying "there has been real growth in the last centuries and especially in the last decades, which it would be criminal to underestimate and from which those who have been excluded cannot be further excluded." Musso called for a "development according to quality" which "promotes human growth in the broadest sense, embracing man in his integrity, his extraordinary and often forgotten richness, which cannot be reduced to the logic of consumption (be it materialist or Marxist)."

### 'Access to our creativity'

Musso said that the challenge facing mankind to continue to develop meant that "the primary resource we have to have access to is our creativity." He continued, "Associated by God at creation, man has interpreted . . . his privileged role, giving free rein to his imagination, his intelligence and his desire for domination; science literally exploded, in a productive and mutual interaction with technology." This development, he continued, led some to believe they were "supermen," and they decreed that God was dead. It is in consideration of these negative aspects, he said, that "we have seen the rejection of scientific-technological evolution, which was responsible for defeating deadly diseases, increasing our life-span," etc. "The ecology movements," he continued, "have made themselves anti-technology and anti-industrial, and have called for the cancellation of technology *tout court* and the return to a 'state of nature' idealized and considered a kind of paradise lost."

This would have devastating consequences: "Having re-

fused scientific-technological-industrial development, there would remain only to decree the end of all development and seek refuge in a demographic stoppage, [zero population growth] without even being able to ensure for those now living in this world conditions . . . for human growth of individuals and peoples." Musso called for "reestablishing the shattered alliance between man and technology; man . . . returning to be the instrument of development which can never be capricious, but is rather the faithful servant of a design which comes from an Other."

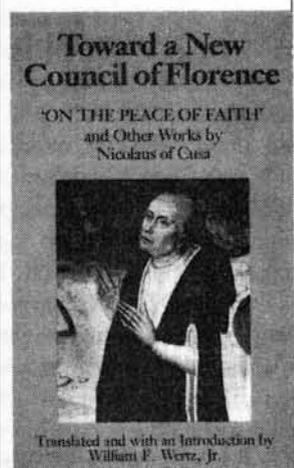
Concretely, what Musso proposed was harnessing science and technology so as to provide "adequate energy supply in forms compatible with the environment" through nuclear energy, "support for agricultural production, health services, water management, reforestation, infrastructure of transportation and communications." In doing so, he added flesh to the debates unfolding in the other round tables, identifying the economic content of a program, inspired by the concept that man, as the highest expression of creation, is endowed with creative reason, with which he is empowered to establish justice through progress. This, rather than any vision of a "universal religion" or vague spiritualism, as advocated by Gorbachov, points to the true parameters for ecumenical understanding among all religious cultures which share this view of God and man.

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