

Interrupted dialogue: Religious leaders in Kosovo

by [James L. Cairns](#) in the [April 21, 1999](#) issue

Today in Serbia there cannot be a solution for Kosovo or any other problem because the undemocratic regime of Mr. Milosevic is not only violating the human rights of Kosovo Albanians, but it is also violating the human rights of the Serbian population." This statement was made not by a NATO nation's foreign minister, but by the Serbian Orthodox bishop in Kosovo, who has been one of the most consistent critics of the Milosevic regime throughout the Kosovo crisis. Sadly, such criticism, and the bishop's corresponding efforts to promote peace in Kosovo, have been among the casualties of the NATO military operation, at least in the short term.

While religion has been inexorably entangled in the conflicts marking the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, the role of religion and religious leaders in Kosovo has been markedly different from their role in the earlier wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The ethno-national groups engaged in the conflict in Bosnia--Bosnians, Serbs and Croats--made widespread use of religious symbols. Religious leaders found themselves identified more as national figures than religious ones and were often manipulated (willingly and unwillingly) to support and defend their respective national communities and leaders. In Kosovo, the long simmering tensions between Serbs and Albanians are marked more by ethnic, linguistic and historical differences than by religion.

The main religions in Kosovo are the same three that predominate throughout the region--Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam and Roman Catholicism--but they are spread over only two ethnic groups, as the Catholics and Muslims in Kosovo are both ethnically Albanian. All three communities have deep roots in the region. Christianity has been present there since the late Roman era, with congregations following both Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) rites. After the Great Schism between Rome and Constantinople in 1054, these two strands became the Orthodox and Catholic churches respectively.

The Serbian Orthodox Church became autocephalous in the early 13th century, and during the next 150 years it established numerous monasteries and its patriarchate in Kosovo, which was at that time a central part of the medieval Serbian kingdom. Albanian Christians identify their roots primarily in the Catholic tradition, but there does exist a small Albanian Orthodox Church. The Ottoman Empire took control of Kosovo in the mid-15th century, and during its rule a great number of Albanians converted to Islam, so that today a large majority of Albanians are Muslim.

Both Serbs and Albanians have sought to use history to legitimate their claims to the territory. However, those claims differ somewhat. For the Albanians, the land is important because it is where they have lived for centuries, and they believe they have a right to determine their own destiny in that territory. For the Serbs, the land is important not just because of residence but because it has religiohistorical importance for them--it is "holy" for both religious and political reasons. As a result, the Serbian Orthodox Church has played a much more central role in the Kosovo saga than the other religious communities have.

As Slobodan Milosevic rose through the ranks of the Serbian Communist Party in the mid-1980s, he evolved from communist functionary to nationalist leader. His skillful manipulation of the history of "holy" Kosovo and the grievances of Serbs living there helped catapult him into the presidency of Serbia. The leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church willingly rode with Milosevic, seeing him as the one who could deliver them from the dark cage of communism in which they had been confined for 40 years. This alliance reached its climax in June 1989, when the Serb nation, in a frenzy of national and religious fervor, celebrated the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo.

That same year, Milosevic revoked Kosovo's status as an autonomous province and placed it under direct rule from Belgrade. Overnight the Albanian population lost many basic rights of employment, education, and use of their language. They mounted a widespread peaceful resistance movement and created parallel social institutions so they would not have to use Serb-controlled ones. Over the next several years, as Yugoslavia dissolved, tensions in Kosovo simmered, with an ever-widening gulf growing between the Serbs and Albanians.

Early last year the Kosovo conflict finally boiled over and descended into the chaos we now witness. What role have the religious communities played during these past 15 months of conflict? In many ways the Serbian Orthodox Church has had the most

at stake, because this is a battle for control of its sacred territory. The irony is that even as Milosevic won the support of the church in the '80s by his use of the Kosovo issue, he has recently begun to lose that support over the same issue.

In the spring of 1998, Orthodox Bishop Artemije of Raska-Prizren Diocese (which includes the territory of Kosovo) began to speak out against the violence in Kosovo-- both through the media and during regular trips to Western capitals. Supported by the monks at Visoki Decani Monastery, in particular Father Sava Janjic (who established an important Web site and e-mail news service), the bishop has argued that both the Serb and Albanian citizens of Kosovo were suffering from the violence being carried out by extremist elements on both sides, namely the guerrillas of the Kosovo Liberation Army and the Serbian military and paramilitary forces that targeted Albanian villages and towns.

Bishop Artemije has consistently called for a peaceful negotiated settlement and decried the crimes and atrocities committed by both sides. In the last couple of months, the bishop has focused even more on the Milosevic regime, stating that without democracy in Serbia (i.e., as long as Milosevic is in power) it is unlikely that any solution can be found for Kosovo.

To his credit, Bishop Artemije has placed his responsibility to protect Kosovo Serbs and the historic shrines of the church in Kosovo above loyalty to the Milosevic regime. He understands that without a political settlement that protects the rights of all people who live in Kosovo, the future of the Serbian community there is in grave danger. He also sees that the repressive policies of the Yugoslavian government have radicalized the Albanians and caused great suffering for all the people in Kosovo. In one appeal, he stated that the problem of Kosovo "is primarily an issue of human rights and absence of democracy, not a territorial problem which is to be resolved by territorial changes."

The patriarch and Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church have not been as outspoken. Partly this reflects the decentralized structure of the church, in which bishops have primary authority for matters within their own dioceses. (Artemije has stated consistently that he is acting with the knowledge, consent and support of the patriarch and Synod.) Their reticence also reflects a tactical approach that has allowed the church to avoid direct confrontation with the regime and thus preserve some degree of a working relationship.

Two incidents, however, demonstrate that church leadership has supported the position taken by Bishop Artemije. First, in late January, the patriarch called on all believers to fast for the week prior to St. Sava Day (perhaps the most important holiday for Serbian Orthodox--it celebrates the founder of the church) in order to pray and reflect on the situation in Kosovo.

Second, after Artemije issued one of his most direct criticisms of the Milosevic regime, Vojislav Seselj, the hardline leader of the Serb Radical Party and deputy prime minister of Serbia, publicly called the bishop a traitor to the Serb nation and people. In response, the church's Holy Synod announced that it was considering anathematizing Seselj. This combination of actions represented the greatest tension between the church and the regime since Milosevic's rise to power, and it offered some hope that gradually the church was beginning to see its institutional interests as separate from those of the state, at least on the matter of Kosovo.

The Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo has made other efforts to find a peaceful solution. The province's Orthodox monasteries, particularly Decani, have been providing humanitarian aid, shelter and other assistance to both Serbs and Albanians throughout this crisis. In addition, Decani Monastery organized a project funded by the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) to assist people in the Decani area--predominantly Albanians--to rebuild their homes damaged by the fighting that took place between May and October 1998.

Also, Bishop Artemije has made numerous calls for dialogue between representatives of the religious communities in order to work together toward establishing peace and tolerance. These efforts contributed greatly to the ability of representatives of the three main religious communities to meet together. Despite all that they were suffering at the hands of the Serbian forces, the Albanian representatives knew about and respected the efforts being made by Bishop Artemije and the monks of Decani.

Roman Catholic and Muslim officials in Kosovo have been much less publicly involved during this crisis. There are a couple of reasons for their relative silence. First and most important: for the ethnic Albanians, Kosovo does not have the religious significance that it does for the Serbs. Additionally, Albanians do not define their national identity through their religion in the same way as the Serbs. Therefore, religious leaders have not been key members in the Albanian leadership, and they have not been called on to sanctify the struggle.

Second, religious officials in the Albanian community have had to deal with the massive suffering of their people. The fighting during 1998 displaced tens of thousands of people, including many religious leaders. A majority of the imams were displaced and their mosques damaged by the Serb forces. Religious communities struggled to survive and could not mount advocacy campaigns. The Catholic Church is quite small (5 percent of the population), and both Catholics and Muslims have very limited financial resources--everything they have has been directed at responding to their community's suffering.

Third, the religious leaders generally sympathize with the aspirations of the Albanian people in Kosovo, and they have faced considerable pressure from within the community not to seek ways of cooperating with representatives of "the enemy" regardless of the positions taken by the Orthodox leadership. The fear of being seen as collaborators also prevented joint dialogue from moving forward until the political process started in France. The mufti of the Islamic community did make a public statement in October 1998, however, in which he acknowledged the calls for peace from the Orthodox Church and urged that "all believers and people of goodwill commit to work together to promote a peaceful and just resolution of this crisis."

Leaders from all three religious communities saw the importance of establishing direct contact and dialogue, and since September 1998 the World Conference on Religion and Peace has been working directly with them to organize this process. Even as the formal peace talks in Rambouillet and later Paris were failing to find a solution, senior representatives from the three religious communities held two joint meetings--first in Pristina, convened by WCRP, and later in Vienna at a conference organized by the Appeal of Conscience Foundation. The leaders called for a stop to all violence and stressed the need to protect the rights of all persons regardless of national or religious identity. They also condemned the misuse of religion for political purposes and committed themselves to seek ways to develop cooperation among them. These meetings represented the only contact taking place between the Serb and Albanian communities in an effort to build bridges between them.

The NATO military operation has abruptly halted the dialogue and destroyed whatever momentum existed. The shock and outrage felt over the bombing of their country has pushed Serbian Orthodox leaders back into a position supporting the Milosevic regime. In the midst of this "outrage" they have had little to say about the horrors taking place on the ground in Kosovo. Bishop Artemije has been silent, while Father Sava at Decani has heavily criticized the NATO attacks and expressed

frustration that he and his colleagues were not able to influence the political leaders to find a peaceful solution. Meanwhile, Muslim leaders have been scattered. The mufti and other officials are in Macedonia, having been forced to flee from Pristina, with many others unaccounted for.

The future of Kosovo cannot be predicted until the smoke and dust of war settles. Though they hold little political influence, the province's religious leaders will be essential actors in any effort to have Serbs and Albanians again live together there. Such an effect might be too late, but the courage and commitment the leaders demonstrated before this conflict might still allow something to be salvaged.

In the conflicts that have ravaged the former Yugoslavia, the overlay of religious and national identity has often put religious leaders in impossible positions where they are expected to have much greater influence over the national community than they do. As a result they are criticized when they are silent and dismissed as ineffective when they speak out. John Alderdice, speaker of the nascent Northern Ireland Assembly, provided a wise insight when asked about the influence of religious officials in his country. He said that even though religious labels define the parties to the conflict, the conflict itself is not religious. Therefore, the influence of religious leaders is limited because they do not have the authority to decide about the issues that created the conflict. At best they can be a voice of reason and moderation seeking to prevent a conflict from descending into the extremes of violence and destruction.

By this standard, the religious leaders in Kosovo performed admirably before this current fighting. I pray they have another chance when it is over.