

REPORT ON VISIT TO MACEDONIA, OCTOBER 8-13, 2005

Journal of Ecumenical Studies/Institute for Interreligious, Intercultural Dialogue (JES/IIID)

1. We, Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler, met with the “Council for Interreligious Cooperation in Macedonia,” which is made up of representatives of the five major religious communities of Macedonia - Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism - to learn of their activities in the past year and to discuss with them their future work in which IIID could be of help. Those present were:

- a. Ratomir Grozdanoski (Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church)
- b. Gjoko Gjorgjevski (Professor at the Orthodox Theological Seminary)
- c. Ismail Bardhi (Dean of the Islamic Theological Seminary)
- d. Jakub Selimoski (former Reis ul Ulema of Yugoslavia)
- e. Antun Cirimotic (Director of Catholic Relief Services of Macedonia)
- f. Slaven Azmanov (Pastor of the Methodist Church in Murtino), substituting for the hospitalized Mihail Cekov
- g. Viktor Mizraki (The Jewish Community of Macedonia)

We learned that in the past year the Council has been working very well together, indeed! They spent four whole days at one point working together to produce a joint commentary on the bill that is before the parliament concerning state regulations of religious communities. Rather than each group responding in isolation, the Council decided to produce a joint commentary - which they were able to accomplish unanimously! Bear in mind that in 2001 the Muslims and Orthodox were killing each other while falling into civil war, and the religious leaders were not talking with each other. They felt that their critique was well received by state authorities as well as by their denominational leaders.

In preparation for our meeting with the Council in session we were able to speak ahead of time at length individually with Ismail Bardhi (Dean of the Islamic Theological Seminary) and Ratomir Grozdanoski (Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church) - representatives of the two largest religious communities by far - who also reported the increasing collaboration between the two theological seminaries.

2. At the Council meeting two ideas were put forth, which after thorough discussion gained unanimous support. They are:

a) The IIID in conjunction with the “Council for Interreligious Cooperation in Macedonia” will organize a four-day regional conference of mainly younger theologians and religious thinkers (Jewish, Christian, Muslim) to be held in the summer 2006, in Macedonia on the theme: “From Conflict to Cooperation: Religious Resources.” Conference languages: English, Macedonian, Albanian.

i. Besides scholars from the Balkan region, and a few appropriate Western scholars, Macedonian scholars would also be invited to present papers.

ii. Faculty and students of the two Macedonian theological seminaries and two Macedonian universities, as well as local clergy and lay leaders, would be invited to participate.

iii. Interactive participation of all would be insured by small-group work and other techniques.

iv. Publication of the conference papers and summary of the discussion in English, Macedonian, and Albanian (as an English language Special Issue of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* and book by the Ecumenical Press, as well as a book in Macedonian and Albanian languages - as was done with the papers from the 2002 Skopje Dialogue).

v. Potential regional scholars to be invited:

1. Ina Merdjanova- Ph. D. professor, at Sofia, Bulgaria
2. Nonka Bogomilova, Ph. D. Professor, Sofia, Bulgaria
3. Milan Vulkmanovic, Ph. D. professor, Belgrade, Yugoslavia
4. Angela Ilic, M.A. Hungary/Serbia & husband Luka Ilic, M.A.. Serbia
5. Ines Murzaku, Ph.D. Rutgers University, originally from Albania
6. Klaus Buchenau, Ph.D. Free University of Berlin
7. Stephen Goodwin, Ph.D. American currently teaching in Istanbul, Turkey (doctoral dissertation on religious peace-building in Bosnia-Herzegovina from U. of Edinburgh)
8. Mitja Velikonja, Ph.D. U. of Ljubljana, Slovenia

9. Nedžad Grabus, Ph.D. professor, Faculty of Islamic Sciences, Sarajevo, B&H

10. Bojan Aleksov, Berlin, Germany

11. Other representatives from Kosovo, Albania, Greece, etc..

b) The “Council for Interreligious Cooperation in Macedonia” in conjunction with the IIID will organize a series of at least three one-day local training conferences on “Respecting Others Builds Up One’s Own Community,” aiming at bringing local clergy and lay leaders of different localities together in inter-personal encounters. The local trainers will be provided by the Council itself. The theme will be “By Respecting Others we Build-Up Ourselves”—a topic that

was proposed and accepted by council members. The purpose is for local religious officials of the different faith-communities to get to meet and interact with one another—something not done previously.

The training conferences probably will take place first at Struga/Ohrid, then Tetovo, and Strumica, and Skopje. The Orthodox community will take the lead on the first training conference, The Muslims the second, and the Catholics and Protestants, the third. The remaining funds from the USIP should be sufficient to conduct three of these. Additional funds beyond the third training conference will have to be sought.

3. We also met with Vladimir Milchin, Executive Director of the Foundation Open Society Institute Macedonia, to report on the progress made since meeting him a year earlier and discussed with him two suggestions on how to further cooperation among the religious communities of Macedonia, including the two specific ideas discussed at the Council meeting. We were encouraged to apply for funds for the Regional Conference.

4. We likewise met with Gillian A. Milovanovic, the new U.S. Ambassador to Macedonia, and Michael D. Orlansky, Public Affairs Officer of the U.S. embassy, and informed them of the JES-IIID Trialogue work in Macedonia and presented them with the two Council suggestions on how to further cooperation among the religious communities of Macedonia. They encouraged us to apply for funding especially to continue the local training conferences.

Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler, Editors/Directors
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