

## Talk of War and Peace on a Greek Island

War and Peace in Europe Seminar, Chania, Crete, Greece, October 14-9, 1994

by Jim FOREST

Crete, the Greek island in the heart of the eastern Mediterranean, has never ceased to attract those who want to command strategic locations. For centuries it was either the Italians or Turks. During the Second World War, Germany seized control from Britain. Today, ignoring local opposition, the United States maintains two military bases on Crete. The only other occupiers are the tourists, mainly Germans, who pour into Crete each day, even in October when cooler weather and the fall rains usually begin.

This year autumn made a late start. It was the hot test, driest October of the century, a man of 85 complained. He wondered if such strange weather was a sign that the end of the world was approaching. Other apocalyptic signs were more familiar to Cretan ears and eyes: several times a days conversations are torn in half as American F-15 jet fighters on practice flights come screaming across the sky a few hundred meters overhead.

Given Crete's place in history -birthplace of Zeus's daughter Europa, according to Pagan mythology, and thus the motherland of European civilization - and given all the blood shed on Cretan soil in the course of many wars, it provided a fitting location for a seminar on War and peace in Europe.

The week-long meeting, arranged by Syndesmos, the Orthodox movement of young adults, began October 1 in the diocesan Cultural Center in Chania, a city on the north coast of Crete. The 50 people taking part came from Greece, Cyprus, Russia, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Albania, Lithuania, Poland, the Netherlands, America, Syria, Israel and India. The conference host was the local bishop, Metropolitan Irinaios of Kydonia and Apokornas, who took an active part in the conference and led one of the discussion groups.

It was my role, as secretary of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship, to give the opening lecture, a speech, which looked at tradition in an unfamiliar way.

“Only a few hours away, in former Yugoslavia, Orthodox, Catholics and Moslems are shedding each other's blood, many of them convinced they are doing nothing less than God's work,” I reminded the seminar. “They all speak the same language, but they drive each other from their districts, providing the world with a chilling new phrase for intolerance and fanaticism: ‘ethnic cleansing’.”

I argued that, although Christianity is incompatible with militarism, we Christians have a remarkable gift to find not only “philosophical but theological justifications for bloodshed. For more than 1500 years most Christians have taken an active part in their nations' wars and been second to none in hating their enemies, even those that happened to be fellow Christians. Not only lay people but most bishops and priests have actively supported their particular nation's military policies.”

Nonetheless Jesus is no patron of armies. "We Orthodox believe that Jesus entered history purposefully, at an exact and chosen moment. What sort of place and moment? The Incarnation did not happen in peaceful times, in the attractive dream world featured in the modern secular Christmas card. It happened in a humiliated, over-taxed land under military domination, a nation kept within the empire by bitterly-resented occupation troops. Jesus was born, lived, crucified, and rose from the dead in a land of extreme enmity. Yet Jesus never blessed or became part of any movement of violent opposition to the Roman presence nor did He bless anyone to join the Zealot movement, the nationalist group using violent methods to seek recovery of national independence."

As the lecture was broadcast on a local radio station run by the Chania diocese, it became a subject of debate not only within the seminar but in surrounding community. One outraged response came from the organizer of a local committee supporting Serbian fighters in Bosnia. He recalled a certain saint who blessed weapons for war, then added, "That's a real saint, mind you! Not the Gospels or the early Church but a real saint!"

The next morning there was a lecture by Father Sergei Ovsianikov, translation advisor to the United Bibles Societies who serves the Russian Orthodox parish of St Nicholas in Amsterdam and is also on the advisory board of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship. He looked closely at the way the words "peace" and "war" are used in the New Testament and in Orthodox worship:

"After His resurrection, Our Lord Jesus Christ said to his disciples, 'Peace be with you.' We know these words by heart. We know them not only from Holy Scripture but because they are so often repeated in the Holy Liturgy. 'Peace be with you and upon you all!' But do we really hear these words? Do we understand that being in peace is a condition of the Holy liturgy? To be in peace with others and to keep the peace of Christ in our hearts. But so many of the words of Jesus Christ have become so familiar to us that we fail to recognize their meaning. They come to us like an old coin used so much, that the image is worn away. We can no longer be sure whose image it is? Caesar's? Or the image of Jesus?"

A view of Jesus in which the images of Christ and Caesar seemed to merge was provided that afternoon in a lecture by Iraklis Rerakis, a teacher of religion in Chania. Though he put his nationalistic convictions in stark terms, probably they come close to views held by many Greek Orthodox. Christ's commandment to love one's enemies and to win by goodness rather than evil, he said, had to do with interpersonal relations, not relations between states. "Christ cannot demand of the faithful Christian," he said, "to betray his country in order to follow His teaching." He regarded war "as a fact of life" and military service by Orthodox men in non-aggressive wars as obligatory. "The fear of war is an impediment to the spiritual life of man. It prevents creative acts. "

The next morning we heard Fuad Farah from Nazareth, chairman of the Orthodox Christian Council of Israel, describe his experience of living in an area in which religion has been a volatile factor in war for thousands of years. What happened centuries ago is still an ingredient in conflict today. Among local Orthodox Christians, the memory is still fresh of Crusades launched by the Roman

Catholic Church in which Moslems and Jews, along with Orthodox Christians, were victims together. He noted in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict ways in which “religious slogans and gross misinterpretations are used for political ends.” Authentic Christianity, he said, is non-violent. "Love is the key note in the teachings of Jesus, repeated more frequently than any other word."

Iikka Uusitalo, an Orthodox layman and former diplomat from Finland who now heads the European Department of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Geneva, described how the Red Cross movement began in order to relieve suffering caused by war, though for many years it has also responded to natural calamities. “Today,” he said, “it often happens that war and natural catastrophes are intertwined”.

Uusitalo warned of the danger of ostensibly humanitarian agencies being used for political purposes. “This has happened, for example, in Bosnia,” he said, “where self-proclaimed Red Crosses have even assisted in ethnic cleansing and collected transportation fees from Moslems evicted from their homes.”

Uusitalo pointed out that there are presently “no classical wars between states but an increasing number of internal conflicts... Fighting is not between well-organized government troops but between all kinds of irregular armed bands and private armies” in which there is no education at all about the Geneva Conventions. This is one reason why “more humanitarian workers have been killed over the last couple of years, especially in former Yugoslavia, than in the previous 20 years.”

At the last session of the seminar, Eguman Efrem, abbot of the Monastery of Philotheou on Mount Athos, recalled the very first war, in which one quarter of the human race -Abel -was destroyed by another quarter - Cain: “brother murdering brother, as is always true in war.”

“No one wants war,” the abbot said, “only Satan and his devils. They cooperate between them and war continues to exist, and all because of our unrepented sins. Everyone who does not truly repent and obey the commandments of God makes himself an enemy of God. How can he make peace? How can he sacrifice himself for love?” He stressed reconciliation: "If we don't reconcile ourselves with others, our prayers are worthless. " The primary action each person can make for peace, he said, is simply to struggle to be saved. This action brings Christ's peace into the world. “The peace of Christ is like a bee -it is drawn to the sweet smell of flowers. But Satan, like a fly, is drawn to foul smells.”

One insightful point was made in group discussion by a participant from Lithuania who observed that most conflicts in the European region are happening in areas where communism dominated. “The collapse of communism left a void easily filled by new evils,” she said.

A final statement from the conference said that economic sanctions, far from being a non-violent alternative to war, were "producing shortages of food and medicine and causing many deaths, especially among the young and aged Humanitarian assistance should not be affected by sanctions against any country."

The Serbian Orthodox Church was supported "in her struggle to find a peaceful solution for the war in former Yugoslavia as well as justice for her people. ...We pray and hope that God will bless all the peoples of former Yugoslavia with peace and mutual respect. "The Seminar voiced distress "with the failure of the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical organizations to see the Serbian Orthodox Church in a way not blinded by prejudice and one-sided press reports."

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Between speeches and work groups, seminar participants found time to visit three monasteries, spent several hours at the Orthodox Academy of Crete, took part in an arduous but unforgettable pilgrimage to the caves where St. John the Hermit lived and died in the fifth century, had meals at several parishes, were present for many church services, and one evening went in groups of two or three to have supper with local families in their homes. Said one participant, "Ours was a kind of conference I had never experienced before, having a spiritual center, not just speeches and talk."

We were fortunate to enter Greece through the door of the Church rather than the door of a tourist hotel. As a result we encountered the soul of Greece and not only her beaches and restaurants. And what of the Greek soul?

One has to say first of all that, despite the secularisation of life that is so evident in modern Greece, the Church is not simply the place to be baptized, married and buried but still a significant factor in the lives of many people. "Our problem", said a Greek Orthodox priest, "is that for to many of us to be Greek is more important than to be Orthodox. We think to be Greek is to be Orthodox. If only it were that simple!"

Greek participants in the conference said that, being in Chania, we were seeing the Greek Church at its best, thanks in large measure to its bishop, Metropolitan Irinaios. For centuries too many bishops have been a remote royalty in the Church whose contact with lay people frequently lacked warmth. In Chania we were amazed to see the large, family-like community of lay people, many of them young, who pray and meet daily with Metropolitan Irinaios.

One young man, a 19 year-old orphan who divides his time between studies and the church radio station, told me about his father's fatal heart attack two years ago. At the funeral Metropolitan Irinaios said to him, "George, from now on I am your father". Eating supper late one night with George and the bishop, I could see how the bishop's words were more than a courtesy expressed at a time of grief. (That night it was the bishop who served the meal and insisted afterward on washing the dishes, by which time it was long past midnight.)

Metropolitan Irinaios doesn't merely complain about secularisation but uses all his time and resources to inspire a deeper religious life. One impressive element of his effort is the radio station, *Martyria*, which broadcasts church services, discussions of Christian life, theological lectures, and traditional Greek music. The station is entirely staffed by volunteers, most of them in their twenties.

After prayers every night, the bishop sits with about 30 people to talk, exchange news, discuss problems and perhaps to sing together. I could imagine that in the early Church such a scene would have been normal. At least in one Greek diocese, it is normal once again.

While the songs within the lay community that surrounds the bishop are mainly religious, there were times during the seminar -while eating meals provided by local parishes -when songs of a more martial character were occasionally sung, including "When Will the Sky Clear?" the unofficial anthem of Crete.

"Jim", the bishop said to me, "I'm afraid this song is not for you" He translated the Lyrics: a grim poem about liberators in the back country getting out their rifles, putting on bands of bullets, and coming down from the mountains "to make mothers without children, women without husbands, and babies to cry without mothers."

No, the song isn't one I can join in singing, but hearing it helped open a window in my understanding of Crete and the horrific events in the past that have led the Greek Orthodox Church to be so uncritical of the Greek army.

By the end of the conference I realized one cannot understand Greeks without being aware of the influence past suffering has upon them, most of all the gruelling experience of centuries under Italian Catholic or Turkish Moslem rule. They could find no way to free themselves except through an armed uprising, which cost them dearly and has made them regard their own soldiers with almost religious respect. Greece is today the only member of the European Community that doesn't legally recognize the right of conscientious objection or provide the possibility of alternative service. (It happens that Greece's arch-enemy, Turkey, takes a similar view.) Hundreds of Greeks, mainly Jehovah's Witnesses, are in prison. Authorities in general seem to ignore the occasional Orthodox conscientious objector, though they do exist.

Meanwhile Greeks are aware that the danger of war is ever present. Some of the Greek islands are in sight of Turkey and tension is mounting about the extent of territorial waters and related questions, The island of Cyprus remains divided between Greeks and Turks by a border that is green on the map but blood red in memory. Relations with Albania are at the boiling point. Finally Greece views as a threat what it calls the Republic of Skopje, and what the people of that republic, formerly in Yugoslavia, call Macedonia. Greeks are not presently in combat, but no one could say Greeks are living in peace. "We are at war," a Greek told me, "only not presently fighting."

One can only hope that the Greek Church can yet play a role in seeking solutions to these potential wars that can be accepted on all sides. But there is not yet a foundation for this to happen, not even the beginnings of dialogue or the will to engage in dialogue. The main ecumenical experience in Greek memory has been in the form of ruthless occupations by Turkish Moslems or Roman Catholics, with the result that both religions remind Greeks of Satan rather than God. There is far to go. Perhaps our small conference on Crete helped open a door that will in time lead in a different direction.