

Peace rises from the ruin of St Ethelburga's

by Bishop of London Rt. Rev. Richard Chartres

The Patriarch of Serbia's denunciation of President Milosevic is no sudden conversion on the part of the Orthodox Church. Months before the beginning of the Nato campaign, Bishop Artimije of Prizren, in one of his letters to Madeleine Albright, the US Secretary of State, courageously said that the "democratisation of Serbia" was "a precondition for a stable peace in the Balkan region".

As the West searches for ways of rebuilding civil society in the region, could religious institutions have any role to play in establishing a lasting peace?

In many parts of the world we see conflicts based not so much on economic competition as clashing cultural identities. Under threat, the temptation is to freeze one's own identity and to demonise the other side. Religious institutions and personalities have often been involved in building up group solidarity in a way which deflects healthy self-criticism and breaks down the possibility of living with differences.

The religious dimension of our search for some kind of global order of justice and peace cannot be ignored. If the potential of faith communities and religious institutions is not channelled into preventing and transforming conflict, then the vacuum will be filled by those who wish to manipulate religious energies for their own narrow political ends. We shall be left reflecting sadly with Jonathan Swift that we seem to have enough religion to hate one another but not enough to love one another.

This phrase was in my mind as I contemplated the heap of rubble in the City of London, which had once been St Ethelburga's Church, Bishopsgate. The church was one of the victims of a terrorist bomb, itself part of a conflict in which religious passions have been exploited. Why not reconstruct the church and bring it to life as a Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, which would focus on the potential of faith communities in preventing and transforming conflict?

I telephoned Cardinal Hume. Anyone else might have said: "It is an interesting idea. I shall think about it and perhaps discuss it with colleagues." The Cardinal said: "It is right. We must do it together."

We recruited other allies including Janet Sowerbutts, a Moderator of the United Reformed Church, and since then we have explored the growing network of centres, worldwide, involved in conflict resolution. It is clear that a multi-track approach to diplomacy is developing in which faith communities may have a role with other partners in transforming conflict. The book, *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, edited by Douglas Johnston,

brings together a number of case studies from South Africa to the Philippines where faith-based approaches have been fruitful.

The new centre will not seek to duplicate the work being done by others but will provide a facility, in a hub of world business and communications, for use by a variety of groups with representatives of world faiths.

There is some encouraging news from Bosnia in the aftermath of the conflict there. Just over two years ago, Orthodox, Jewish, Roman Catholic and Muslim representatives signed a Statement of Shared Moral Commitment which articulates common moral principles and affirms mutual respect for each other's religious traditions. As a result, an alliance has developed between members of the Inter-Religious Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina which is now an active partner in the attempts to rebuild civil society.

The way ahead in Kosovo will be more difficult. Christians and Muslims lived side by side in Bosnia but in Kosovo they more frequently lived in separate villages. At the same time, religious institutions in the country have been enfeebled by 50 years of communist pressure, which is part of the reason why some religious leaders have been co-opted by the nationalist cause.

The record of the recent violence does, however, contain some encouragement. In the mainly Catholic village of Glodane, Father Spaci, the parish priest, with members of his congregation, risked themselves to protect more than 1,200 Albanian Muslims from the Serb militia. The monks of the Decani Monastery have also shown hospitality to the stranger at great personal cost.

One of the last letters Cardinal Hume signed was addressed to the Editor of The Times and contained a rationale for the Centre for Reconciliation and Peace. He was particularly insistent that it should not be a place where religion was merely regarded as a tool to serve other ends, however humane, but that it should also be a centre of living prayer.

The Times has consistently urged that St Ethelburga's, as one of London's few remaining medieval churches, which escaped both the Great Fire and the Blitz, should be rebuilt. This initiative preserves the surviving parts of the medieval fabric, while bringing the church to life for a 21st-century purpose. I am convinced that historians in the future will look back upon our time with a question. What did they do to build the conditions for lasting world peace with justice? They will look to see whether we have learnt any lessons from the Kosovo crisis. The work being done now in the wake of the bombing is a vital test of our determination to find new ways of managing conflict in the new world order. Cardinal Hume understood this challenge at a profound level and the centre will be one of the many ways in which his vision will live on.