

# **Peace and Reconciliation in Europe**

**Richard Seebohm**

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## **Introduction**

I have spent the last three years as Representative in Brussels of the Quaker Council for European Affairs, lobbying the European institutions on the subjects of peace, human rights and economic justice. One of our outcomes was a club of 17 NGOs with whom we set up the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office. It began work in January 2001, with the task of information-sharing in order to link the non-violent conflict resolution capabilities of the NGOs with the evolution of European Union policies for crisis management.

It is one thing to avert crises, but quite another to solve the problem of enabling people who have been intent on destroying each other to learn once more to live alongside each other.

## **What we are up against**

Someone once spelled out the basic problem. When you meet someone from your birthplace, you expect to find a common bond. An elderly neighbour of ours, however, spoke of her Ulster home by saying 'How do you deal with people when to be in their presence makes you feel physically sick?' In the early 1990s my wife had a refugee working in her office whose parents from Sarajevo, both respected academics, were respectively Serbian and Croatian. They had no homeland where they could safely live together. There were many mixed marriages in Rwanda when a Belgian journalist (since convicted) referred on the local radio to all Tsutsis as cockroaches. An EU aid worker spoke of a village on the Muslim-Serbian border within Bosnia where some Muslims had been persuaded to go back to their former homes in an otherwise Serbian neighbourhood. Then one house was set on fire and they all fled again. Serbs in their enclaves in Kosovo have no expectations of a normal life, and experience does not suggest that their perceptions are false. But miracles constantly happen. In a recent edition of the Quaker magazine, *The Friend*, Brian Phillips of Amnesty International describes a Bosnian Muslim whose former school friends became his brutal prison guards, but he, miraculously, seeks truth and justice, and not revenge.

## **Techniques that have been tried**

One has an intuitive supposition that traumatised populations must have an intense 'them and us' feeling - that the Bosnians, for example, will think of a world made up simply of Muslims and Serbs. I had always wondered what would have happened if literally thousands of foreigners of all descriptions had simply arrived in Bosnia in the early 1990s. I later found out that something on these lines had been tried in 1994 by an Italian peace movement. It had not been successful because the participants had made no detailed plans for what they were to do - the technique is still untried.

The 'window to the outside' can be opened in other ways. My daughter Henrietta is a trainee drama therapist. During the past two years she has been sponsored by the Anne Frank Foundation to work with traumatised children in Sarajevo. She gets them to act out the story of Anne Frank to show that other people in other circumstances have been brought face to face with merciless political violence. The children - and perhaps their audiences too? - have been transformed by the experience. She has gone on to do similar work in different settings. She has produced improvised plays with teenage children in Lithuania from the Jewish and indigenous communities in which the aim has been to reach a state where everyone instinctively trusts each other. She has brought Hungarian Roma children to Sarajevo and got them integrated into her drama group. She has worked with mixed groups in Mostar, Montenegro and Albania.

I would also like to describe an initiative much nearer home. A Christian organisation called Soul Survivor last year took 11,500 young volunteers to Manchester over two one-week periods to carry out social projects in deprived areas. These ranged from renovating open spaces which had become drug-infested no-go areas to creating the nucleus of a youth club. The project, entitled Message 2000, consisted of groups of 25 each with 4 facilitators who took part in conferences in the mornings and went out to work in the afternoons. Two old men in next-door streets who hadn't spoken to each other for 30 years became firm friends. Crime in the year after the project was 40 per cent of what it had been the year before. The projects were preceded by a two-year planning process in which paid and part-time voluntary staff discussed local needs in detail with the local environmental, health and education services and (in particular) the police. The authorities got projects completed which might have been their responsibility but which they could never have raised the resources for. But the one-off nature of the exercise restored local self-respect without usurping the roles of public sector employees.

I know that there are humanitarian NGOs doing project work in ex-conflict zones on similar lines. One difficulty they have is that their finance tends to be hand-to-mouth. It is hard to plan if you don't know until six months into the year whether or not you will get European Union funding, and then have to spend it all before the end of the same year.

## **The task ahead**

There is an imposing array of needs to be addressed if communities are to be rebuilt. I am indebted to a professional in this field, Diana Francis, for articulating some of these.

Dealing with the past is one. The best-known and most impressive example is South Africa's Peace and Reconciliation Commission. Telling the truth (and reducing the

number of lies) was a start. The African tradition of storytelling helped. Getting transgressions acknowledged was a vital move towards affording human dignity to all. Forgiveness did not mean forgetting, but it helped to achieve 'closure'. This worked pretty well when individual transgressors could be singled out. When whole communities have attempted to destroy each other, as in Rwanda, the problem is deeper. One thinks of child soldiers in Northern Uganda who are forced by their captors to beat to death any of their colleagues who rebel, fall ill, or simply can't keep up. Even worse is the position of their counterparts in Sierra Leone who are forced to begin by shooting their parents. The little they know of structured life, safety and companionship is in their own armed groups.

Reintegration of combatants, adult or child, calls for resources which are seldom available. It is not enough to disarm them and turn them loose (or worse, not disarm them).

And when history is collective, how far back can you go? It is easy for a Westerner to scorn the Serbian myths about Kosovo, but in the so-called United Kingdom we allow one Christian group to celebrate provocatively in the marching season the humiliation of another Christian group three hundred years ago.

Diana Francis gives space also to rituals as part of the closure process. These may include recognising the rights of the dead as well as the living.

Security is a must. But this cannot be indefinitely enforced by external 'peacekeepers'. The goal must be to put in place, as soon as possible, trained and accountable police, a trusted and prompt judicial system, and above all, political leaders who can be voted out. Democracy itself is easy to advocate but hard to provide in a divided society. I think even the politicians have recognised that the 'countdown to vote' is not an end-point in conflict resolution. The Bosnians have had to choose (according to commentators) between two sets of crooks.

Corruption is frequently a fact of life. Trusting only those you know can easily turn into the exclusion of a minority. Out-of-date pay scales may make an official's life untenable without the income from bribes. Without an articulated, well-understood and well-enforced structure of commercial law, the distinction between debt collection and extortion is unclear. So is the boundary between reasonable opportunism and greed. An ex-colleague of mine was helping small businesses to set up in Macedonia on a British government contract. I asked whether they were in the black economy. She said, of course. No one in their right mind would pay taxes levied at rates which had remained unchanged since the times when the very concept of profit was seen as a fraud on the state.

Another intractable reality after every conflict is refugee migration. The geographic and economic space they once occupied has probably closed up behind them. They may have no true home base. They may owe their plight to power politics conducted for objectives completely irrelevant to them. They may be traumatised and bitter, and ill-equipped to earn a living. They and other minorities may have customs and behaviour norms, such as begging and stealing for a significant part of their upkeep, which are incompatible with membership of a settled community.

Which brings me to straight economics. It is much easier to be magnanimous when you are not desperate for tomorrow's supper, and when your house (if you have one) has a roof. It does not help to see those who burnt your own house down living in luxury. Broken-down infrastructures of communications and utilities need to be mended. Past and current pollution must be addressed. Past traditions of land and water management may not be sufficient to serve the farmers and consumers of the future. And the fragmentation of nations (the very word Balkanisation is still valid) reduces everyone's chance of making a living unless frontiers are toll-free and movement-free. It is a pity that there is no simple free trade preliminary to joining the EU, but as a start, the political divisions in former Yugoslavia should not be a barrier to trading. (There is a cosmetics factory in Montenegro which is unviable unless it can serve the whole region.) As Diana Francis says, peace is a space for human thriving.

Most important of all, however, is a culture of peace. Education, media, the role of 'civil society' in the form of local associations and cross-cutting single issue pressure groups all have a part to play. External NGOs can help but not if they are self-serving or if they create a culture of dependency. (They must test themselves daily against the catchphrase 'do no harm'.) Diana Francis points to the gender issue. She says that there can be no peace while women are treated as chattels or generally as less than human. I believe that she is right to dismiss the argument that her standpoint is culture-based rather than universal. One useful soundbite from the Council of Europe is that our vision should not be of multiethnic societies but of plural identities. I am a solicitor, working in Bristol, born in Pakistan, Muslim, mad about football and cooking. You are a student in Bristol, French, Catholic, mad about football and music. She is a solicitor, working in Bristol, British-born, atheist, mad about music and cooking. Each of us has enough strands in common with others to escape blind stereotyping.

## **Threats and obstacles**

In transcending past history, it is not for us to atone for colonialism, but we need to recognise some of its effects. I suspect that not many people following the conflict in Sri Lanka realise that the British when in control favoured the Tamils, particularly by giving them top jobs in the administration. After independence the majority Sinhalese deliberately attacked these advantages, requiring Tamils to get higher marks in university entrance exams than their own people. No wonder the Tamils are now both bitter and well organised. In Uganda, too, the British aimed at tribal homogeneity instead of multi-ethnicity in public administration and (importantly) the army. It was different in Nigeria, where tribal balance was the policy. In Rwanda, shortly before the genocide, the UN proposed that identity cards should no longer show tribal origin but the French vetoed the idea. Celebrating differences is easy to advocate, but it does not take much in the way of grievances for immigrants and minorities to be seen as threats.

The media had a big bearing on the dreadful outcome in Rwanda. I have seen hate propaganda in authentic Belgian election leaflets. An Iranian I know researched the question 'who wins after a revolution?', and his answer was, whoever has the best communications. In Iran, of course, it was the mosques. In Serbia, the internet was unstoppable, and everyone had mobile phones, but in Burma if you are found with one you will be shot. One media answer is plurality at all costs, but there is more to be

said than I can go into now. Monopolised media and censored communications are unacceptable, however hard it may be to restore plurality.

An even more intractable threat is the existence of mineral wealth in a poor country. There may well be no compromise acceptable to a warlord who has become wealthy. Africa is the home of the obvious examples, but most of the south of the former Soviet Union is at the mercy of oil politics.

Finally, there are 'spoilers', warlords or activists who have no interest in any kind of settlement. They may or may not have a realistic political objective. ETA and the IRA are the obvious European examples. Perhaps we should include mafias in this category, since they depend on a semi-functioning society but are very hard to outface.

## What about God?

We all know that wars have been fought with both sides confidently proclaiming that God is on their side.

The [Orthodox Peace Fellowship's](#) website declares:

'Aware that each person is made in the image and likeness of God, we seek recovery of a sense of familial connection which, while respecting national identity, transcends all tribal, ethnic and national division... Aspiring to eliminate violence as a means of conflict resolution, we promote resolution of conflicts by mediation, negotiation and other forms of non-violent action...seeking conversion both of ourselves and our adversary.'

The [Muslim Peace Federation's](#) website points to the following Qur'anic principles as guides:

"No compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error." (Surah Baqarah, 256). Coercion destroys the reality in faith, and creates only rebels or hypocrites. While it is our duty to keep the way of Islam open, Allah alone can guide hearts.

"To Allah belong the East and the West. Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of Allah." (Surah Baqarah, 115). Truth is not limited, but is to be discovered and honoured everywhere. Both traditional and modern cultures have something important to contribute to the service and contemplation of Allah.

"We have created you as nations and tribes so that you may recognize each other." (Surah Hujurat, 13).

"If Allah had wished, He could have made you all one community, but His plan is to test you in what He has given you. So compete with each other in good works." (Surah Ma'idah, 48). Human diversity is a divinely ordained blessing. One of the reasons that cultures differ is so that, by mutual examination, we can learn more about the vastness of what it is to be human. Another reason is that outside perspectives help keep all of us honest. We are grateful to Allah for our differences, which save us all from complacency.'

I constantly seek to know more about the taxonomy of conflict - what underlies the

violence. Two particular themes stand out. There are those in denial who say that their opponents are vermin and therefore ineligible for human dignity. I see no moral dilemmas in using every faith resource to counteract that one. But what if you know your opposite number all too well, and he has been party to the killing of your husband and son? I cross the gender line here, because perhaps women are better at facing up to reality than men. I think of the Chinese proverb much quoted recently: when you are planning revenge, it is best to dig two graves.

We come back to truth and reconciliation, amnesty but with penance, an end to denial. Human beings with God's help are endlessly resourceful and capable of regeneration. We ignore at our peril the self-help which is going on in former Yugoslavia, sometimes kick-started by external NGOs but often not. I said God's help in the Quaker sense - God in everyone, and the extra presence when two or three are gathered together in the cause of peace.