

Religion as a Conversation Starter: Interreligious Dialogue for Peacebuilding in the Balkans

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Ina Merdjanova and Patrice Brodeur

New York: Continuum, 2009.

Fractured Land, Healing Nations

Stephen R. Goodwin

Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006.

These two books consider the contentious religious factor in the Balkans by seeking the ways in which the often-mentioned social divisiveness of religions can be countered by peacebuilding. With eyes and ears attentive to the significant obstacles posed by religion to healthy interreligious relations, the authors delve into empirical studies of “religious peacebuilding.” Goodwin’s focus is Bosnia-Herzegovina, while Merdjanova and Brodeur look comparatively at various Balkan states, but provide perhaps the most detailed look at Bosnia-Herzegovina. The books’ different aims and methodologies make them complementary and mutually supportive overall, and are to date the only studies of their kind with respect to combination of subject matter and empirical data.

Goodwin’s book consists of three parts: 1) setting the contextual and conceptual stage for the study; 2) an overview of his empirical research with religious leaders, women, and youth; and 3) a theological and ethical analysis of the empirical data as it relates to religious peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Goodwin problematizes the religious factor in Bosnia-Herzegovina (chapter 1) by explaining the way in which religious ideas, traditions, and symbols powerfully bolstered group narratives that were then utilized for nationalist political mobilization and war. However, he counters this view of religion as a divisive and exclusionary force with the perspective of religious peacebuilding (chapter 3), which asserts that religions can and do also contribute to peace. In fact, because religion is so inherently

involved in the conflict—as the prime signifier and rallying point for difference—Goodwin thinks it is crucial that this religious factor be addressed in peacebuilding activities. The international community’s attempts to implement peace have not dealt satisfactorily with religious and value-based elements of the peacebuilding process and have consequently been insufficient and sometimes counterproductive, as chapter 2 explores. On the other hand, Goodwin explores religions’ peacebuilding contributions in chapter 3: values and identity formation, especially in times of upheaval; local resources for restorative relations, such as the foundations of social ethics and human rights; and religious actors with a capacity for and commitment to reconciliation.

Goodwin’s primary, new contributions are his empirical data and its analysis. A significant asset for the scholar, transcriptions of all twenty-eight interviews used in the study are provided by the author on a CD that comes with the book. With regard to analysis (part two), Goodwin finds that religious leaders’ contributions to peace are: their sense of the transcendent who assists in healing and wholeness; their ability to look to the roots of conflicts (ideology rather than ‘the enemy’); and their access to civil society and formal governing structures, although the latter, in the form of leadership positions, can be limiting. Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina consider the lived faith dimension of peacebuilding very significant, allowing them to overcome social and national barriers and even to offer forgiveness: “Faith in God necessarily leads to [their] ethical response to others” (173). The personal stories of four religiously engaged youth seek to offer hope that active faith inspires forgiveness and peaceful relations in an otherwise discouraging environment for young people. While these interviews heighten the value to the book, they also raise the controversial nature of the author’s assessment. This reviewer can anticipate scepticism from Bosnian residents (especially non-believers) towards their religious leaders’ beautiful speeches about peace, framed against their public actions that seem hypocritically nationalistic. The unrepresentative method of including only religiously engaged youth in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where such religiosity is low, also raises questions.

Goodwin’s analysis of this empirical data (part three) is largely ethical and theological. He examines the theological concept of restoration, in the sense of bringing wholeness and health, for the Bosnian situation as well as the experience of forgiveness as healing. Perhaps most fascinating is his discussion of “re-memorying” the powerful national myths, which, in

their current form and use, have largely entrenched exclusivity and hostility. This “re-memorizing” can be done through personal and collective (in faith, ‘sodalities’ rather than nations) recollection of the grand creation narrative, where all humans are created in God’s image. Given the importance of collective belonging today in Bosnia-Herzegovina, his data about these alternative sodalities of faith (*zajednica* or *zbor*, centered on a new vision of religion) and his suggestions for new myths address rather than avoid this problematic factor related to collective religion today.

In *Religion as a Conversation Starter*, Merdjanova and Brodeur, as compared with Goodwin, address what seems to be a narrower subject—interreligious dialogue—with a wider geographic scope, the Balkans. However, given their definition of “interreligious dialogue for peacebuilding,” their subject seems to overlap almost completely with religious peacebuilding. The key is that all interreligious dialogue for peacebuilding (IDP) explicitly includes religious identities in these IDP “activities that foster an ethos of tolerance, nonviolence, and trust” (25). IDP seeks to focus on dialogue for understanding but this dialogue is not limited to discussion; the authors include art and music, for example, as a form of interreligious dialogue. Since the geographic scope is wider, but includes more data on Bosnia-Herzegovina than any other location, the greatest difference between this and Goodwin’s book (besides the comparative approach) is the disciplinary perspective and methodological approach to studying religious peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Merdjanova and Brodeur are sociologists of religion and use their empirical data (an impressive set of sixty-five interviews and seven email surveys, as well as self-organized IDP seminars in nine Balkan locales from 2005 to 2008) to not only assess the situation of religious relations and peacebuilding, as does Goodwin, but also to make policy recommendations. Additionally, it includes the theme of religious education, which has grown in significance in Bosnia-Herzegovina since the 2004 Law on Religious Freedom provided every citizen with the right to religious education. ^[1]

Upon explaining her IDP subject matter in chapter 1, chapter 2 provides a brief overview of interreligious relations in the Balkans, including a country-by-country^[2] glimpse (62) of religious trends post-communism. It also includes a comparative chart per country considering demography, laws about religion, restitution of religious properties, and public school religious education. Chapter 3 then considers religious peacebuilding actions and

various actors dealing with some common elements, such as religious education, reconstruction of religious buildings, plus social reconciliation. This chapter also includes a comparative look at Interreligious Councils in the Balkan states introduced by the World Conference on Religion and Peace, which further demonstrate the focus of this chapter on structural elements of IDP. The authors express their positive opinion that top-level decision makers are increasingly engaging IDP/religious peacebuilding to respond to conflicts a mere three years after Goodwin's exhortation for more of this very thing. Whereas Merdjanova and Brodeur optimistically predict a peacebuilding role for many of these international and high-level local efforts, Goodwin is (along with many Bosnian locals) more sceptical of such "track one" efforts.

Chapters 4 and 5 assess the achievements and challenges of IDP and make policy recommendations, respectively. The new material presented here is perhaps the most laudable element of this book. The list of IDP achievements include a growing awareness of the need for dialogue ("cooperation is a promise for reconciliation" according to the authors [99]); the expansion of IDP (or religious peacebuilding) as an area of education, research and publishing; and notable achievements in women's, youth, grassroots, and artistic IDP. Nevertheless, unsurprising challenges remain, such as the communist legacy of poor religious education and anti-religious attitudes, the much discussed nationalist linkage of religion with politics, the frequently negative role of international peacebuilders (as discussed in Goodwin, chapter 3), and a weak tradition of interreligious dialogue and engagement with its capacity to build peace. The authors make different policy recommendations for international organizations and governments and determine yet another set of recommendations to enhance cooperation of IDP across the local-international divide. While the authors' recommendations to international organizations are neither specific to IDP nor new to the peacebuilding literature for this region, their recommendations to governments are more specific to religious issues and consequently more interesting for this review. For the educational sector, they recommend cross-confessional and comparative religious education plus organized dialogues between religious educators about methods and curricula. For the media, training about religions and developing critical skills (also known as "media education") is advised, while those involved in healthcare are encouraged to use IDP for post-traumatic psychological healing.

While it is impossible in this short review to convey the stories and exemplary efforts of the many individuals and groups presented in these two books, each assessment made by these authors is substantially supported with interview-based evidence. The empirical data combined with their theological (or value-based) and sociological analyses provide two truly unique and complementary studies to the field of both religious peacebuilding and the literature on Bosnia-Herzegovina today.

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1. 1. In a personal communication with the reviewer in 2004 (January 7), Goodwin expressed the significance of religious education and how the research about religious peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina would be enhanced with a study of these developments.
2. 2. Countries include Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia.