



The Silenced Voices of Our Other Self

In our ecumenical anthology we have gathered articles that have relation to the neighbour as their focal point. There have been times in our recent history when it seemed like the concept of neighbour had failed or become obsolete, but precisely for this reason a re-thinking and re-positioning of the neighbour is needed.

The Shop that Charged No Interest

Seventy years ago there lived a little boy in the village of Horné Orešany in Western Slovakia. He was born in an ordinary Roman Catholic peasant family that lived—like many of the families in that region—on winemaking.

In the village there were two shops. One of them belonged to some relatives of the boy, while the other belonged to a Jewish shopkeeper. Every autumn, when the time of the grape harvest came, the boy was sent to buy things needed for the processing of the wine.

He was always sent to the Jewish shop with the explanation that the shopkeeper there knew that they could only pay when the wine was sold, and that he would charge no interest. In 1942 the shopkeeper and his family suddenly disappeared and the shop that charged no interest was closed down.

The little boy—who is an old man by now—was reminded of this seemingly trivial experience of his childhood many times throughout his life, but especially when big words about solidarity, community building and social cohesion were spoken.

“Who is my *neighbour*?” one could ask in connection with the story. Søren KIERKEGAARD in his book *Works of Love* maintained that the beloved and the friend are often referred to as the *other-I* or the *other-self*, the *alter ego*.

This is, however, not the case with the *neighbour*. Between the *I* and the *neighbour* there is often no affinity or even connection; thus the neighbour is for the *I* a *real other*, the “first you.”

Our two seminars in 2006 constitute the basis of this book. They were held in Lublin, Poland (March 2005) on the topic ‘*May Their Voices Never Be Silenced*’: *The Spirit of Central Europe Sixty Years After Shoa*; and in Ramingstein, Austria (July 2005) on the topic *Brave New World: Searching for Security in the XXIst Century*.

Sixty Years After

The historic city of Lublin, Poland, provided a proper and apt setting for this year’s winter seminar of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) Central European Subregion (CESR), which dealt with the legacy of the Shoa (Holocaust) in Central and Eastern Europe.

The event was unique in that, for the first time, it was prepared in cooperation with a partner from outside the subregion: the *Evangelische StudentInnengemeinde* (ESG, the German Protestant Ecumenical Student Christian Movement).

Various aspects of the Shoa were examined, among them the theological: we explored the tenuous relationship between God’s goodness, omnipotence and comprehensibility. The “Holy Saturday” conception of our current age, the post-Shoa period, was introduced—the time after the occurrence of a catastrophic event, but before the meaning is given to us.

In line with this, and following the renowned psychologist Viktor FRANKL’s life, work and important ideas, we considered the crucial factors to the search for the meaning of life. Further, we examined the various psychological implications of the Shoa, including the roots of evil and the process of coming to terms with its existence.

Various moral and ethical dilemmas were presented from the times during and after the Shoa, ‘in the shadow of Birkenau.’ One example was whether or not individuals who were members of the National Socialist (Nazi) party should be allowed to hold public office in the post-Nazi period.

An exhaustive chronology was given of the denazification process, war trials, compensation to victims, establishment of memorials, public penance, and the beginnings of open discussion about the Shoa in wider German and other societies.

It was especially interesting to hear about the differences between East and West Germany in their treatment of the Shoa. East Germany seemed to be far ahead of its Western counterpart in making the concentration camps and their associated crimes open to the public, for example.

Another example is Jedwabne, a village in Northeast Poland, where the entire Jewish population (1500 people) was brutally massacred in a single day in July 1941. It was long thought to be an operation of a Nazi *Einsatzgruppen*.

Recently evidence has appeared, however, which indicates the Polish townspeople were responsible for the pogrom. Poles also have to come to terms with their guilt for antisemitic actions—a process that is still ongoing.

The Majdanek camp is thought to be the largest of all the Nazi camps, where barracks, showers, gas chambers and the crematorium have been preserved. Perhaps one of its most terrible aspects is its close proximity to the city of Lublin. The townspeople certainly had to be aware of its existence, if not of the full scale of the atrocities being carried out under their noses.

Each nation can imagine why she is better than all the others, and this is where the roots of ethnic prejudices and discrimination lie. Giving a chilling example of how genocide cannot yet be consigned to the dustbin of history, the ethnic cleansing was described that took place during the break-up of Yugoslavia from 1991–1995.

Also, the on-going ethnic tensions between Serbs and ethnic Albanians in Kosovo were addressed. Efforts were made to discern the roots of ethnic tensions and the ingredients necessary for conflicts to flare up into violence.

Some of the other subjects covered were the following: theology of the Old Testament in the Third Reich; Shoa: anomaly or product of modern society; antisemitism and antizionism: how much Israel-criticism is allowed.

Others included the sins of the mothers and fathers; family stories from hard times; crisis of democracy: Adolf HITLER as a predecessor; Jewish culture and traditions: a virtual tour of Budapest's Jewish quarter; and ecumenism and interreligious dialogue with Judaism.

Searching for Security

The magnificent XIIth-century Castle Finstergrün in Ramingstein, Austria, was the storybook setting for the subregion's annual summer seminar. It was a fitting venue for the topic, *Searching for Security in the XXIst Century*.

We aimed to explore the ways in which fear and the desire for security order our lives on the personal, communitarian, national and religious levels; and further, to help formulate strategies for responsible risk-taking within the same contexts.

The ideas of Utopia and of Dystopia (or, in other words, Anti-utopia) served as subtexts, comparing and contrasting the Dystopian visions presented in three landmark books of the XXth century.

These books are the following: Mikhail ZAMYATIN's *We*, George ORWELL's *1984* and Aldous HUXLEY's *Brave New World*. All these books are chilling reminders of how easily the dream of security for all can turn into security for none under the tyranny of the two main totalitarianisms.

We were challenged to define *Utopia* and *Dystopia*, and to fill in the levels on Abraham MASLOW's pyramid of needs. We examined our fears of the unknown, being different, and physical intimacy, all within a safe and non-threatening environment.

Dealing with security in family and society, we were presented statistics on social trends in post-communist countries, plotting a set of accepted values on axes of traditional versus secular-rational authority, and survival versus well-being.

While the global trend is towards increasing values of well-being, in some post-communist countries the reverse is true: values are moving increasingly towards survival, reflecting a fundamental insecurity in societies in transition. We attempted to define *family* and list its functions, as well as identifying how and what kind of values should be transmitted to the next generation.

We were reminded that real or perceived threats do exist in and between our nations, whether based on a legacy of imperialism or on the insecurity of "Old Europe" when confronted with "New Europe."

Addressing security in religion, we explored the notion of cyber-theology. The religious ideas and rituals described in *Brave New World* were analysed and related to world religions, especially Buddhism and Hinduism.

Three possible relationships between *I* and *It* were outlined, noting that the rise of technology has toppled the traditional *Creator–creation* relationship, as imperfect humans now feel inferior to perfect computers.

Humans are challenged to affirm their humanity by finding a sense of security and self-worth through the redemptive love of God. Related topics we covered included the necessity of God; ecumenism; the Matrix and hyperreality; basic self-defence techniques; and the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in contemporary society.

Various modes of confrontation with the *Alien* were described: controlling or attempting to control it; accepting it as alien; or accepting it as something holy. We centred on ambiguity, reification and otherness.

Also, we brainstormed on how we can contribute to overcoming or coming to terms with ambiguity as a source of insecurity and reflecting on approaches to *Otherness* in our cultures and denominations.

We attempted to differentiate between *safety* (basic physical protection) and *security* (a broader psychological term with many symbolic associations). Threats to identity were dealt with as the basic insecurities, ontological uncertainties caused by crises of values.

We moved to the perception of threats, especially differences between U.S. and European perspectives; and then to various models of interacting with the rest of the world: as member, partner, or enemy.

We brainstormed the ingredients of *identity* before tackling the eternal conundrum: Does the West exist? And if so, what are its borders? We were charged to integrate the various inputs into a coherent vision of Utopia.

Many imaginative models of religion, education, communication and government were shared. The topic of fear and faith was also related to the story of Abraham's calling by God to leave his homeland behind and strike out for the unknown.

Similarly, we examined the Biblical stories of Elijah and the widow who had no bread; of Jesus Christ walking on water; and of the vision of the coming perfect world in Revelation.

Hospitable and Peaceful Context

The idea of a Central European subregional project was born in 2001 in Praha, Czech Republic, amongst a group of young people from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, who came to know each other through the activities of WSCF Europe.

They felt that the youth in their respective countries were facing similar challenges and could benefit from addressing these issues in a multinational context, which would also further awareness of cultural diversity and help to establish a Central European identity within Europe as a whole.

The cooperation was originally conceived as a set programme of joint activities per year: two seminars, a language and leadership training, and the publication of an ecumenical anthology.

The first seminar on *Ecumenism and Central European Identity* was held in the Békés Gellért Ecumenical Institute (BGÖI), Pannonhalma, Hungary, in 2002. This was the event where Austria joined the sub-regional cooperation.

The second seminar that year, on the topic of *Ecology and Environmental Protection*, was held in Vilémov, Czech Republic. Following it the anthology *A Pentatonic Landscape: Central Europe, Ecology, Ecumenism* was compiled and published in Budapest, Hungary.

Cooperation among these five countries has continued in the years since then. Further seminars were organised, with responsibility for hosting the seminar rotating among the different countries.

Further ecumenical anthologies have also been published annually. In this way the core partners have built up a long experience, both of organising events and assembling publications, and of working together in an international context.

These endeavours will lead not only to direct descendants of this project, but also to many other diverse projects connected by the common thread of youth and student initiative in pursuit of a more hospitable, peaceful, ecumenical and dialogical world.

Sustainable Identity

WSCF Europe has been involved in our cooperation from the beginning, not only as the medium through which the founding mothers and fathers of the subregion came together; but it has also provided encouragement, advice and some financial support for the Central European cooperation.

Established in 1895 as the first international youth and student organisation, and the first ecumenical movement, WSCF has more than a hundred years of experience in activities similar to ours.

These include organising international student conferences and seminars, publishing ecumenical journals, ecumenical reviews and ecumenical books; and, equally important, has members or contacts in more than twenty countries across the continent.

This status allows for a mutually beneficial relationship between WSCF Europe and the partner organisations, with the former providing experience and international contacts, and the latter bringing more and more innovative ideas and creative working methods into the life of WSCF Europe.

We also develop and raise many leaders who go on to be active in WSCF Europe as well as in their national organisations. WSCF Europe clearly sees her role in our cooperation as that of a facilitator, providing resources to allow the partners to realise their vision, and to renew and rejuvenate their vocation.

It is clear, then, that there is a solid foundation upon which to base our cooperation. The main emphasis of our cooperation is on the virtue of *sustainability*: we envision it as a long-term cooperation between the partner organisations, implemented in two or three year cycles.

All of our activities and structures are oriented to this end: the four-tiered leadership training, the board and proxy system, and especially the careful and thorough documentation of past experiences to ensure that they are handed down to the next generations.

This is also the reason why we emphasise youth returning to their national and local contexts to employ the wisdom and knowledge that they have gained in our international events.

Our strong hope is that by focusing on developing sustainable and innovative activities and firm but at the same time dynamic structures, we achieve a highly cumulative effect.

Language Understood by All

The main activities of our cooperation comprise a cycle of student seminars, one in each of the five full partner countries, and programmes of language and leadership training courses in Eastern and South Eastern Europe.

The seminars take place approximately every half-year: the winter seminar in February, and the summer seminar in July. *Lingua Franca* courses take place beginning after the seminar in July, continuing throughout the month of August.

The length of the seminars are five or six days for the winter seminars, as they occur while university classes are in session; and seven or eight days for the summer seminars. The first and last days of the seminars are reserved mainly for travel.

The seminar programme itself consists of a combination of lectures, panel discussions, workshops and discussion groups, as well as first-hand experiences through cultural excursions. Aside from these, time is also reserved for board meetings, informal socialising and cross-cultural exchange, and even common celebrations.

Lingua Franca language and leadership training courses are organised in much the same way. The courses last for two to three weeks, depending on the needs of the hosting organisations. Teaching takes place for five or six hours per day, with the remainder of the day devoted to cultural activities, group building and excursions.

Teachers are encouraged to use a variety of interactive learning methods, not merely lecturing and written exercises, in order to facilitate the language learning and leadership training.

The cultural programme is also conceived as an extension of this, as it is also conducted in the language being taught, allowing informal learning in an environment of immersion and trust.

Dialogical Give-and-Take

Our website (www.wscf-cesr.org) is continuously updated and maintained throughout the year, providing the latest information and application materials in advance of events and incorporating interesting and thought-provoking reports and photographs of them after they have taken place.

Upon completion of the second seminar each year in July, an edi-

torial board is formed to produce that year's ecumenical anthology—this is the book which you now hold in your hands.

The board drafts a call for articles based on the themes of that year's seminars, and distribute this call via email to all seminar participants, partner organisations and the WSCF Europe database.

As the articles are submitted, they are read by each of the editors in turn and any comments or suggested changes are indicated. Most of this work takes place via email, but the editors meet in person several times during the process as well for consultation purposes, usually in Budapest, Hungary.

After revisions are agreed among the editors by full consensus, they are sent back to the authors for final approval, ensuring that a dialogical give-and-take relationship exists between all persons involved in the production of the book.

The illustrator is chosen from a different country of the cooperation each time. Using original artwork in the book allows young artists a forum in which to develop their work, and it provides another opportunity for youth and students to become more involved in the project.

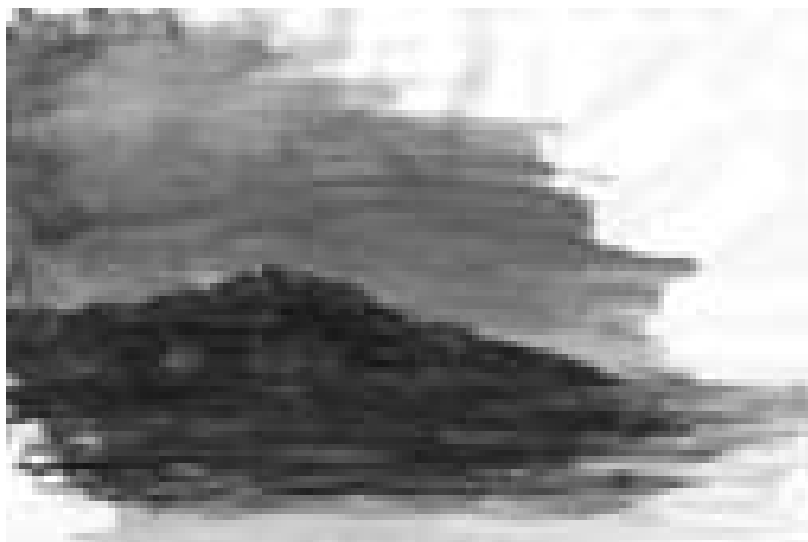
Remembrance and Future

We remain thankful to the Benedictine Archabbot of Pannonhalma, Bishop *VÁRSZEGI Asztrik OSB*, the director of the Békés Gellért Ecumenical Institute (BGÖI), for his strong support. We also remain grateful for the support of the Dominican province of Slovakia and its provincial, Benedikt Róbert HAJAS.

We are especially grateful to the Fonds “Erinnerung und Zukunft” (Remembrance and Future Fund), Berlin, Germany that supported and promoted this project of ours. We are also very grateful to our seminar donors: the *International Visegrád Fund (IVF)*, the Council of Europe's *Solidarity Fund for Youth Mobility* and the Benedictine *Békés Gellért Ecumenical Institute (BGÖI)*, Pannonhalma.

In particular, we would like to thank our mother organisation, the *World Student Christian Federation Europe Region (WSCF-E, www.wscf-europe.org)*, and the European Regional Committee (ERC), especially her chairperson, *Alessia PASSARELLI*, and her regional secretary, *Hanna TERVANOTKO*, for their support and valuable incentives.

Finally, let us introduce the illustrator of this fifth ecumenical



anthology of ours. *Andrea HANEK* (andrea_hanek@hotmail.com) studies graphics and design of communication at Linz College. She is an Evangelical-Lutheran from Austria, a member of the *Evangelische Hochschulgemeinde in Österreich* (EHG), the Austrian Student Christian Movement (SCM), which is a member of WSCF.

She always liked drawing and painting and it has been her main hobby for as long as she can remember. She hopes to become a good graphic designer after her education, because it is indeed the kind of activity she likes to do.

She participated in the CESR Winter Seminar in Lublin, where the topic was the Shoa. She has remained horrified by the historical treatment of the Jews and other disadvantaged and marginalised groups.

What keeps startling her the most is that even the next door close neighbours and the previous friends turned against the oppressed, who had no one to really trust and to get help from.

The most frightening thing is—and at the same time it calls for education and also common action—that maybe the Shoa was not only a social abnormality of the past, but it could happen again at any time.