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SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Boston University's Adam Seligman (center) with Father Evaldo Xavier (left), and Allen Katzoff.

## Taking a tough road to tolerance

BU professor brings people together by confronting differences

By Omar Sacirbey  
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Getting Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, and Albanians to spend 17 days together may seem like courting chaos. It was barely a decade ago that the four Balkan nationalities waged vicious wars. Add a Jew, a Palestinian, and half-a-dozen or so others from societies marred by ethnic and religious strife, and conflicts seem inevitable.

They don't have to be, argues Adam Seligman, a religion professor at Boston University who is a co-founder of the International Summer School on Reli-

gion and Public Life, an emotionally and physically intensive program in which he prods fellows from war-torn regions to confront atrocities, explore hate and redefine trust. Seligman is skeptical of dialogues in which people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds seek to find harmony by identifying their similarities. Rather, the New York City native believes people achieve tolerance not by seeking common ground but by seeking the unfamiliar and the uncomfortable, then learning to live with it.

"I'm not interested in getting people to find simi-

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# Finding harmony in discord

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larities — that's easy — but in getting people to show their differences, and then asking if they can still work together," Seligman, 52, said. "When you work together, you hear arguments differently."

A devout Jew who has spent the better part of his career studying religion as a source of conflict and tolerance, Seligman developed his premise as the Bosnian war raged from 1992 to 1995. The war left 100,000 to 200,000 people dead, mostly Bosnian Muslim civilians killed by Serb and Croat forces whose leaders told them they were defending Christian Europe. Mosques, libraries, and other landmarks were destroyed to erase any traces of Bosnian Muslim culture.

Despite millions of dollars spent over decades on memorials and education about tolerance and democracy, Seligman lamented, mass murder on a nationwide scale happened again in the heart of Europe 50 years after the Holocaust.

"It seemed nobody had learned anything," he said.

Seligman believed existing models of using common ground to teach tolerance had failed and new methods were needed. He and a group of "religiously committed" Jews, Christians, and Muslims, while at a conference in Sarajevo in 2001, conceived the idea for a school that would teach tolerance by grappling with conflict, not embracing similarities, and by 2003 had secured enough funding for their first program in Bosnia. The program now counts the Andover Newton Theological School and Hebrew College in Newton, the US government, and the Ford Foundation among its sponsors, and after sessions in Bosnia and Jerusalem in past summers, is slated for Turkey next summer and Nigeria in 2008.

This summer it was the Bosnian town of Stolac, where some of the war's worst atrocities were



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**Professor Adam Seligman says confronting and accepting uncomfortable differences between ethnic and religious groups is the key to resolving problems and tensions between them.**

committed, and Boston, with its contentious racial history, that provided the backdrop of racial and religious tension for 15 fellows from 10 countries.

Before the war, almost 19,000 people lived in Stolac, and Muslim mosques, Catholic churches, and Orthodox churches stood only steps apart. But Bosnian Croat militias expelled or killed most of the town's Muslim and Serb inhabitants, who together comprised about two-thirds of Stolac's pre-war population. In 2002 almost 80 percent of the town's 10,000 residents were Croats.

Today, with the population largely unchanged, the community is as divided as ever.

Arriving in Stolac on Aug. 2, the fellows — mostly academics, but some clergy and relief-organization workers — spent eight days helping rebuild religious edifices, including a 15th-century mosque, attending services, and spending time with host families, many of whom had been refugees or lost family during the war. Mingled into the work were visits to a bone disease hospital that Croats had turned into a wartime torture center, and a high school where today bells ring for Croat and Muslim students at different times so they won't meet between classes.

"We had a chance to feel this war up close," said Haifa Khoury-Sabbagh, 43, a Palestinian Christian from Jerusalem who likened the tension in Stolac to the tension

between Israelis and Arabs.

Some felt closer to the war than others. Slavica Jakelic, a Croat who teaches religion at the University of Virginia, had studied and written extensively about the Bosnian-Croat fighting, the atrocities committed, and the destruction of mosques and churches. But visiting the abandoned hospital-turned-torture-center had a unique impact on her.

"The moment when we all stood in front of the bone hospital was different for me than anything I wrote about before because it went beyond the cognitive level of understanding. It was a moment of 'othering my own group' — when my own group became the Other to me," she wrote in an e-mail after the program concluded.

Seligman considers experiences that force people to consider the suffering or perspective of others, maybe even enemies, "knowledge you have in your bones." Once that is experienced, the fellows can move on to considering how to stop ethnic or religious differences from deteriorating into violence. Part of the answer, Seligman believes, is learning to live with the source of discomfort, whether it be something unfamiliar or one's own dark deeds.

"Learning to live with discomfort is also learning to live with the ambiguity of the world," Seligman said. "We're constantly building theories to explain things so we won't have to live in dissonance or

in discomfort. And then we assume everybody shares those theories and they don't."

That's when trouble begins.

Consider Boston, where fellows spent their last six days visiting churches, mosques, and synagogues to get a taste of American pluralism, but also spent hours in classrooms and the Boston Police Department to learn about the violent bus protests of 1974, Charles Stuart, Stop and Frisk, and tensions between different religious and racial groups here today.

"I was really surprised that there are these kinds of problems in the USA. I couldn't imagine it, really, like you copied it from Bosnia," said Alma Mrgan, a 24-year-old who works for a reconciliation organization in Mostar, a city also divided along Muslim-Croat lines.

Some fellows seemed comforted by Boston's problems, as if it meant that if America can have racial strife and coexistence at the same time, perhaps their societies can also achieve it.

Whatever lessons the fellows take home with them, Seligman hopes they can put them to good use.

"You can't get this kind of knowledge without having this type of experience," he reasoned. "But you can, by getting certain people who are agents of social change, to experience this and then perhaps they can find a way to use this knowledge as a basis for new understandings."