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Rejecting Utopias, Embracing Modesty: Reflections on Interreligious Peacebuilding in Light of the International Summer School on Religion and Public Life

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Rejecting Utopias

My field of study, Christian Social Ethics, is a child of the “Social Gospel” movement.¹ At its best, this movement represents the incredible possibilities of constructive and theologically informed Christian political engagement toward the creation of a just society. At its worst, it represents the worst of religious social thought: the utopian dreams of naïve people whose religious vision of a perfect society impeded their work for a good one.² Like many others influenced by Enlightenment beliefs about human potential, some Social Gospellers believed that humanity was evolving into a more moral race and was coming into its final stages of development. This dream quickly became a nightmare in the wake of two world wars and the attempted extermination of European Jewry. Advances in technology did not coincide with advances in morality. Rather, they made it possible for the modern phenomenon known as “genocide” to come into existence.

On the other end of the spectrum, for nearly a century people were predicting the global decline of religion. People proclaimed “the death of God” and forecast the rise of a global secularism, understood as the disappearance of religion from public life. Those who were wiser cautioned against such bold claims, but the mainline story for decades was that religion was “on the ropes” and had nearly zero chance of long-term survival. Today we know that such predictions were naïve and pompous. The significance of religion in global public life seems, to people in the West, to have increased exponentially over the last decade. Of course, the importance of religion was never in decline,

we often simply chose to ignore its untraditional manifestations. The utopian vision of a “secular” society liberated from religion seems like nothing more than a fairy tale in today’s world.

Finally, many liberals, devoted to social justice and peacemaking around the world, continue to spread the often offensive untruth that “all religions are really the same” or that “at the heart of every religion is love and justice and peace and, therefore, we should all just get along.” They gloss over real and significant differences between religious and theological traditions in order to proclaim a false universalism and surface unity between the religions. We have seen over and over that people are often willing to die and kill over those seemingly “trivial” differences liberals want to ignore. They pursue the solidarity of religious traditions through the categories of liberalism and, therefore, fail to do justice to both the great religious traditions and the project of liberalism. The utopian hope of all faiths leading up the same mountain is dashed every time someone refuses to climb the aforementioned mountain.

Utopias are exciting and we want to believe them. They give us a goal to work toward and an energizing spirit that inspires masses of people. Utopias sustain us when reality causes others to

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despair. However, utopias are false dreams that eventually shatter when people attempt to implement them in history because they must eventually exclude those who do not buy into or fit neatly into the vision. Liberalism is one such utopia, and Communism is another, and both have been party to some of history's most egregious crimes. They were the leading political visions of the bloodiest century on record.

In contrast, the International Summer School on Religion and Public Life (ISSRPL) embodies a pedagogy of modesty. Rejecting all utopias, the ISSRPL pursues tolerance, shared practices, recognized and embraced differences, and the admission of religious, theological, and ethical ambiguity rather than purity in communal religious life. Perhaps the most important form of modesty practiced by ISSRPL, however, is its refusal to claim to know any final answer to the complex question of how to make and sustain peace in a religiously plural world. The school is an experiment as much as it is anything, and while there may be tentative theories being explored, the results of the experiment are not yet clear. Focusing on the lived experience of religion in various contexts, the school challenges and complicates the "neat" pictures of public life theorists like John Rawls and Karl Marx present. Public life is not just "political life" in a narrow sense. Religious life is public life as well.

An Example of What is Possible

Bulgaria is a country that has passed through centuries of Orthodox Christian hegemony, five hundred years of Ottoman rule, decades of a Communist regime, and is now in the early stages of a liberal democratic society. Now, imagine if you will an Orthodox Christian monastery in Bulgaria that is home to one young monk. This monastery was built over a century ago by a Muslim man whose Muslim wife found healing at a nearby spring of healing water tied by legend to the traditional Orthodox faith of the country. Today this monastery houses a very old icon which has a special miraculous power: it provides healing to women who have been unable to conceive. Many women come and pray before this icon every year

and find healing for their barren wombs. Christian women pray before this icon. Muslim women pray before this icon. This occurs in a country where churches were destroyed and converted into mosques which were centuries later converted back into churches. This, in a land where Turkish-Muslims were exiled to Turkey, and Bulgarian-Muslims were forced to have their names changed into "Christian" ones as recently as the 1980's.

In a land with centuries of ebbing religious conflict, how does such a place as this monastery exist? On the one hand, it is a miracle. On the other hand, it is very simple: Christians and Muslims share something there. They share a history, a holy relic, and a practice of healing. Through times of strife throughout the rest of the country people of various religious backgrounds have come to pray before this miraculous icon. They have shared life's pain and joy, at least, in this one place, and it has survived conflicts between religions and the Communist attempt to eliminate religion.

In this space questions of theology are not asked, Holy Scriptures are not compared and contrasted with one another, and no attempts at conversion are made. People from various religious backgrounds simply share in a practice that gives life. They go away from their shared practice different but not converted. Rather, they allow the space to be what it is—a shared space of life-giving practices—and do not trouble that space with the conflicts that sometimes rage outside.

However, that space is not wholly "public," and outside that space conflicts still occur quite frequently. ISSRPL exists to discover if there are some other shared public practices that can create the space for tolerance. It is an experiment of which no one yet seems to know the results.

What is ISSRPL?

ISSRPL is an experiment, a "laboratory," in which scholars and activists of interreligious peacebuilding from around the globe travel to some place in the world with a history of religious conflicts and live together for two weeks. During this time they eat

meals together, study together, sightsee together, witness each other's worship services, and even do "yoga" together. Throughout these two weeks a multitude of conversations and key events occur. For instance, imagine Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians from Bulgaria, Uganda, and Indonesia singing "Amazing Grace" while American Jews and Bosnian Muslims cheer them on. Or, imagine a heated debate about Muslim women wearing headscarves in which a Muslim woman makes it clear she will not remove her scarf because "it is part of who she is." In response, a Christian man says, "You weren't born with it on your head," to which a secular Jewish woman enthusiastically cheers. Both of these instances happened within hours of each other at the 2011 ISSRPL. This is life at the ISSRPL.

The Principles of the ISSRPL

There are several key principles and assumptions under which the ISSRPL functions. The first is that the dominant models in contemporary political philosophy, liberalism and communitarianism, are inadequate models for making sense of religious plurality and establishing a sustainable peace. Adam Seligman, the founder of the school, said, "[One] purpose of the school is to understand the implications of different political models."³ One implication of both of these dominant models is that they are inadequate in the face of increasing religious diversity. They both assume a certain type of hegemony, of the individual or the traditional community, which inevitably excludes certain religious persons from ever being able to be full members of such a political community. They both create "others" that can never be wholly integrated. Rather than attempt to perfect one of these inherently flawed models, the school is an experiment in creating a third way between them.

A second key assumption is that "part of living together is bearing one's own discomfort."⁴ In other words, there are differences that cannot be transcended and these differences will sometimes, if not oftentimes, make us uncomfortable. For instance, I am uncomfortable when I see a woman wearing a burqa; in fact, I find it hard to fathom

how enforcing this practice is anything other than a form of oppression of women. In a like manner I cannot count the number of times I have had Muslim women insist to me that women in the West are oppressed because they are forced to adhere to standards of beauty and sexual vibrancy that distract from their intelligence and spiritual strength to be successful. The dress of women in the West is truly offensive to their social, religious, and moral sensibilities. However, this does not mean that we cannot live with one another in a way in which we respect, or at best tolerate, our differences without either of us "accepting" them. More importantly, this does not mean that we cannot live together without eventually wanting to kill one another even if we never accept all of each other's practices.

This is a third core principle of the school: tolerance is not "too low" a virtue to be the goal of interreligious peacebuilding. It is popular today to dismiss tolerance as an inadequate goal for social life because it implies a "distaste" for another's way of life and, therefore, we should move beyond tolerance to acceptance or the celebration of differences. The school takes as one of its starting points the exact opposite stance. Just as human rights best function as a "floor" or "basement" for our social life rather than some unattainable "ceiling," we should strive for tolerance because that is the best we can achieve in a world in which religious differences are often not simply a matter of "taste" but have significant moral and social implications. There is a high likelihood that one's religious (and political) beliefs and practices are highly offensive to someone else. One part of social life is that we live with people who offend us. Striving to live as if this is not so is another utopia that is bound to disappoint. Rather, if we could simply tolerate those who offend us and make us uncomfortable we will have taken an important first step towards a sustainable peace.

One way in which this discomfort is borne by everyone in the school is by attending one another's religious services. Witnessing the worship of another person can be a jarring experience. We are reminded of the different ways that we each pray

to our God and that we inhabit different religious and moral worlds. While there are always places of contact where some commonality can be found, those points of commonality do not remove or transcend our differences. The differences always remain and must be tolerated if they cannot be accepted.

An important part of such tolerance, for the ISSRPL, is the willingness to live together under the assumption that no one people group—religious, ethnic, national, or racial—has a monopoly on suffering. In other words, no one in the school can claim the suffering of their people as a trump card to end the hard work of attempting to live together through offense and injury.⁵ This is, perhaps, the most difficult principle of the school as there are often people in the school who come from places where the rhetoric of “greater suffering” of one group versus another is a daily reality. It is easy to view the goal of tolerance as a cynical one that refuses to move past “petty” offenses, but when one remembers that peacebuilding is not necessarily about how to live peacefully with your annoying next door neighbor but, rather, how to live peacefully with the person who stole your family’s land or how to ride the bus with the person whose brother killed your daughter, we are reminded of how difficult interreligious peacebuilding can be.

The learning that happens in being physically present in the worship of another or in suppressing the desire to claim one’s suffering as a trump card is fundamentally different than the learning that happens when reading an essay on prayer or reading about the suffering in your enemy’s history. This type of learning impacts us beyond some form of generalized knowledge⁶ about the other by forcing one to learn what it means to physically remain in relationship with one whose words or life are at times offensive. This is why the ISSRPL places such an emphasis on embodied pedagogy.⁷

Finally, the school assumes that over two weeks of living, studying, and working together the group of between thirty and forty well-intentioned people of goodwill will “splinter.” Some event will occur that drives a wedge between certain members of the

group. All that we have discussed before is tested in this experience. Can we practice tolerance in the midst of real offense and injury? Inevitably, it seems, the group recovers from this experience and comes back together to live together in a tolerant community. What is it that enables this to happen? This, it seems, is the yet unanswered question. In the year I was part of the school it was drawing upon some of the core principles of Western liberal individualism that brought the group back together. I gathered from conversations that in previous years it was a commitment to some form of communitarianism that brought the group back together after strife. However, neither of these alone is sufficient for the enterprise. The question of the school is, “What is the third way between these two dominant political models that the school is uncovering in its annual practice?”

Embracing Modesty

Out of my experience with the ISSRPL I have learned three key lessons for thinking about interreligious peacebuilding: first, dialogue is insufficient to establish peace; instead, shared practice, even public rituals, are necessary to sustain any peace begun through dialogue or political policy; second, interreligious peacebuilding is risky and there is never any guarantee that an achieved peace will last; third, we must embrace theological, political, and embodied modesty and reject the pursuit of utopias.

One of the most common responses to religious diversity and conflict is to promote interreligious dialogue. In these settings people of different faiths come together and talk about their religious beliefs with one another. Members of one religion teach members of another religion about their holidays, theological commitments, and forms of worship. Oftentimes, the purpose of such sessions is to dispel rumors about a religion or answer “hard questions.” While such dialogue is helpful in introducing people who may not otherwise cross paths to one another, and serves as a type of “icebreaker” between communities, it is insufficient to establish a sustainable peace. The knowledge gained at this level of engagement is still too abstract and general to sustain peace. Rather, people must share life

together.⁸ Some form of shared practice—perhaps as simple as sharing a regular meal⁹—is necessary for people to move beyond seeing those of another religion as a “generalized other.”¹⁰ Practices are concrete, and sharing practices is an embodied experience that makes it harder to act as if the one you share such a practice with is not a human in the same way you are a human.¹¹ It is ritual that sustains religious communities during times of theological strife, and it will take some form of publicly shared ritual between religious communities to sustain any understanding or peace that is achieved through dialogue. “Ideal speech situations” do not exist in reality. In reality what we have are embodied persons who share space with other embodied persons. Shared practices and rituals create an embodied knowledge that simply cannot be achieved through dialogue, no matter how “ideal” it is.

In addition, no matter how much dialogue occurs or how many practices are shared, there is never a guarantee that today’s peace will last tomorrow. Peacebuilding is always risky.¹² In response to this reality, the ISSRPL emphasizes “trust.”¹³ It claims that with modernity we have had to learn to live in danger. More often than not we have responded to this danger with practices of exclusion, othering, and violence. In traditional communities there is no need to “trust” anyone because you can have “confidence” in them. Everyone you encounter is a person like you—from the same family or tribe—but with the rise of the modern age we began to live with strangers. You can never be confident about how a stranger will react to your action or even your being. Living amongst strangers seems to be an inherently dangerous situation. In this situation, if we want to live peacefully, we must trust our stranger-neighbor with no guarantee that they will not harm us. Thus, every attempt at living peacefully with those who are “other” is a risky endeavor.¹⁴ To pursue a worthwhile end we must always take risks. Our attempts at life-sustaining moral action are never guaranteed success. Too often people refuse to act without the confidence that their actions will achieve their intended results; they do not engage people without knowing they will be respected and treated appropriately. However, if we only welcome others when we

are sure our hospitality will be reciprocated we become slaves to our individual prejudices and fears and of our society’s generalized stereotypes of those who are our strangers. To create peace we must be willing to trust people who offend us and make us uncomfortable. It is for this reason that peacebuilding is always a risky endeavor.

Finally, we must embrace what Adam Seligman calls “epistemological modesty”¹⁵ and Ellen Ott Marshall calls “theological humility.”¹⁶ We must be willing to admit we do not have a monopoly on the truth if we are ever to achieve a lasting peace that includes those who are “not like us.” One can claim to know the whole truth and maintain a certain form of peace in a homogenous and hegemonic community, but in a plural society one must always make “modest claims.”¹⁷ We must make modest and humble claims—and have modest goals—because bold claims too quickly become utopian justifications to continue the cycle of violence that plagues our world. The most terrible crimes and human rights abuses of the twentieth century—genocides in Europe, Asia, and Africa, constant and protracted warfare, decades of Apartheid rule in South Africa, the use of “disappearances” in Latin America, international terrorism—were all committed in the name of political, ethnic, and religious utopias. Some of history’s greatest atrocities have been motivated by humanity’s highest ideals. The remedy for such overzealous violence is modesty.

One of the leading causes of violence is the notion of “purity.” The pursuit of ethnic and religious purity, especially, has served as a justification for violence against all who may be potential “pollutants.” One way in which we learn to embrace modesty and reject utopias is through sharing spaces and practices with one another. For example, the monastery mentioned earlier is a shared space that both Muslims and Christians in Bulgaria have an interest in preserving because they share practices there. In a similar manner, there is a small community in Macedonia in which Orthodox Christians and Sunni and Shi’a Muslims all celebrate the Day of Saint George at the same shrine. In these celebrations the Christians incorporate some traditionally Macedonian Muslim practices (such

as stepping through a string of beads), the Muslims incorporate some traditionally Christian practices (such as giving gifts of eggs dyed red), and they all incorporate traditional Macedonian practices in their celebrations (specifically, the youth swinging from a rope on a tree).¹⁸ They share holiday practices and a holy space and maintain peace while being surrounded by communities that have experienced conflict. While shared spaces and practices are no guarantee of peace, they are a risk that, when taken, opens up the space where trust and peace are viable possibilities.

Conclusion

We live in a world shaped by great ideals and horrific violence. The twentieth century has taught us, if it has taught us anything, that the inevitable outcome of striving for utopian dreams is historically gruesome violence. In response to this, the ISSRPL maintains that we must take modest steps towards religious peace. These steps must be physical and not metaphorical. Politics is impotent to create peace between religious and ethnic groups. Dialogue, while pointing in the right direction, is incapable of sustaining peaceful relations. Perhaps we should return to the lessons of so-called “primitive” or “traditional” religions and communities and create shared practices and rituals that perform peace. Habituation in such practices may be able to form people with the virtue of peacebuilding. And even if we continue to be so different from one another that we still experience discomfort, perhaps we will have enough of the virtue of patience to be able to bear our discomfort. At least, this is what the ISSRPL understands to be its modest claim. And if this happens, maybe we will stop killing each other.



1 See Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley –Blackwell, 2011), for the most comprehensive survey of the discipline and the story of its roots in the Social Gospel movement in the United States.

- 2 See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (1932, Charles Scribner’s Sons; reprint, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), and Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of An Era* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), for two of the most biting critiques along these lines.
- 3 Quoted from an informal conversation at the 2011 ISSRPL.
- 4 Adam Seligman, “Trust, Tolerance and Modernity – the Problem of Liberalism,” lecture delivered at ISSRPL on July 5, 2011.
- 5 Charles Taylor has called the phenomena of using the suffering of one’s people group as a “trump card” the “victim scenario.” He claims that one defining feature of the modern world is the proliferation of people claiming to be victims in such a way that it justifies their present and future violence. When two groups continue to use this “victim scenario” against one another a cycle of violence is put in motion that is very difficult to overcome and often ends in the mass killing of innocent people. It is no coincidence for Taylor that genocides arose in an era where the claim to victimhood absolves moral considerations. See Charles Taylor, “Notes on the Sources of Violence: Perennial and Modern,” in *Beyond Violence: Religious Sources of Social Transformation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, edited by James L. Heft, S.M. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 15-42.
- 6 See Adam Seligman, “Pedagogic Principles and Reflections Developing Out of ISSRPL Practice,” *ISSRPL Occasional Paper Series No. 1*, <http://www.issrpl.org/vision/op.html>.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 8 This claim is not dissimilar to Sharon Welch’s critique of Jürgen Habermas “that morally transformative interaction requires far more than conversation between different groups and people” and her claim that “genuine’ conversation presupposes prior material interaction, either political conflict or coalition, or joint involvement in life-sustaining work.” See Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk: Revised Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000). 124.
- 9 Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 136. “For those whose differences are great, work together is often possible at only the most basic level: preparing food together, cleaning, building houses, making clothing.”
- 10 See Seyla Benhabib, “The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg – Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory,” in *Situating the Self: Gender,*

Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics (New York: Routledge, 1992), 158-70, for the classic exploration of generalized knowledge about social groups.

- 11 I am not so naïve as to think that practices as simple as eating together will lead to world peace. Rather, I am claiming shared practices such as cooking and eating open up spaces that make peace a greater possibility than if those spaces had not been opened. Sadly, Tone Bringa, in her documentary film *Bosnia: We Are All Neighbors*, has demonstrated that even friends who have shared coffee for decades can abandon one another in times of violent conflict between religious groups.
- 12 John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 163-9.
- 13 See Adam Seligman, *The Problem of Trust* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- 14 This is not unlike Sharon Welch's "ethic of risk." Welch argues against an "ethic of control" which has defined so much of Western ethics and argues instead for an "ethic of risk." She defines the ethic of risk in this way: "The ethic of risk is characterized by three elements, each of which is essential to maintain resistance in the face of overwhelming odds: a redefinition of responsible action, grounding in community, and strategic risk-taking. Responsible action does not mean the certain achievement of desired ends but the creation of a matrix in which further actions are possible, the creation of the conditions of possibility for desired changes." Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 46.
- 15 Seligman used this phrase during a group conversation during the 2011 ISSRPL.
- 16 Ellen Ott Marshall, *Christians in the Public Square: Faith that Transforms Politics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 75-6. "I use the phrase theological humility to denote a posture that (1) admits limitations of knowledge and partiality of perspective, (2) explicitly and deliberately practices hermeneutics, and (3) remains transparent about faith commitments and accountable to other sources of knowledge."
- 17 See Adam Seligman, *Modest Claims: Dialogues and Essays on Toleration and Tradition*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).
- 18 I learned of this shrine from viewing the unpublished film *Peace for All (Shared Shrines)* and in informal conversations with its director Elizabeta Koneska. The historical background behind this film can be found in Elizabeta Koneska, "Shared Shrines in Macedonia," in Elizabeta Koneska and Robert Jankuloski, *Shared Shrines*. (Skopje: Macedonian Centre for Photography, 2009).