

The crucible of Kosovo: Top religion stories of 1999: Assessing intervention

Cover Story in the [January 5, 2000](#) issue

The 20th century began in Sarajevo and it will end in Sarajevo.” That saying, current during the war in Bosnia, wasn’t too far wrong. A grim age that began with the 19th century’s bleeding to death in a war sparked in the Balkans is ending, in places like Sarajevo and Kosovo, with the aftershocks of communism’s collapse.

The war in Kosovo left a trail of destruction and suffering in its wake—a trail that extends from Albanian Kosovars killed, exiled or left homeless, to Serbs who died beneath the NATO bombs that demolished much of Serbia’s infrastructure. And a new cycle of violence began when Serb troops pulled out of Kosovo: Serbs who remained became the targets of ethnic Albanian revenge.

Churches in the U.S. debated the war’s justness, and most lined up in opposition to NATO’s actions. The day after the bombing began, the Church World Service Unit Committee of the National Council of Churches issued a statement that viewed with equal “horror” the NATO bombing attack and “the attacks by the government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on its own people and villages.” In late April and early May Jesse Jackson and the NCC’s General Secretary Joan Brown Campbell, along with other religious leaders—Christian, Muslim and Jewish—traveled to Belgrade to meet with Serb religious and political leaders, the latter including Slobodan Milosevic. They were able to obtain the release of three U.S. soldiers who had been captured near the Macedonian border.

Less a defining moment than a deeply ambiguous one, the war provoked an array of hard ethical questions that should concern all people of faith. Answers, if they come at all, will help set the agenda for national and international relations in a new century. Among the questions:

Should human rights trump national sovereignty? If Kosovo becomes the precedent, then the answer is yes. But subsequent events in 1999, in East Timor and Chechnya, indicate that national sovereignty—and power—still command respect. The U.S. (unsurprisingly) has not gone beyond critical words and threats of economic consequences in registering its alarm at Russia's handling of the independence-minded Chechen region. In East Timor it commended a deal that involved both the UN and the Indonesian government.

Unable to get the agreement they wanted from Milosevic at the Rambouillet meetings in France, however, and certain that UN Security Council-sanctioned action in Kosovo would be vetoed by Russia or China, the U.S. and its NATO allies intervened in Serbia's sovereign territory without UN authorization. The action countervailed the UN requirement, in place since 1945, that the Security Council must approve air strikes against a state that poses no danger to other states.

Those who supported the intervention argued that continued diplomacy only allowed Milosevic to complete once and for all the harrowing of Kosovo. They also expressed concern that serious abuses of human rights, including genocide, were being perpetrated behind the protective veil of national sovereignty.

However one may judge NATO's intervention in Kosovo, the dilemma remains: How do nations adjudicate between their commitment to human rights, including the United Nations' Conventions on Genocide, and their commitment to the UN Charter's protection of national sovereignty?

Is it justifiable to wage high-tech warfare against a low-tech adversary? While comparatively few complaints could be heard about the deployment of sophisticated weaponry in the Gulf War, the decision to wage a relatively low-risk war (low risk for one side at least) entirely from the air—from high-level altitudes at that—struck many observers as a policy that was strategically flawed, and, well, just not fair. The reliance solely on air power eventually forced Milosevic to yield, but it did not prevent, and may have abetted, ethnic cleansing. Moreover, NATO's decision to bomb Serbian territory outside of Kosovo, including attacks on Serbia's economic base and its transportation and communication infrastructure, also drew sharp criticism. Even those who supported NATO intervention dispute the war's prosecution. At minimum, a strategy that entails destroying the means necessary for a citizenry to flourish seems to violate at least the spirit of noncombatant immunity.

What is the role of national churches in nationalist wars? While no serious voice claimed that the Kosovo conflict constituted a religious war, nevertheless religion was a factor. It should have been clear to everyone that Serbs feel so strongly about the region because it is reckoned the cradle of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serb nation itself—a combination of Jerusalem, Mecca and Gettysburg. And the Milosevic regime repeatedly justified its actions in Kosovo by casting itself as the protector of Serb holy land from a separatist population that is also Muslim. Elements within the Serbian Orthodox Church had variously supported, criticized, ignored and distanced themselves from Yugoslav government policy in Kosovo before the war. After the war, Patriarch Pavle, head of the Serbian Church, acknowledged that crimes had been committed by Serb forces and called for Milosevic's resignation. Yet the suspicion remains that for a sizable portion of that church, Milosevic's greatest sin was losing Kosovo and failing to protect Orthodoxy's sacred places.

Never again? After the enormity of the Holocaust become evident, the slogan "Never again!" came to give common voice to the sentiment that never again would the international community allow the perpetration of acts of genocide—a sentiment formalized in the United Nations' Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted in 1948. Genocide happened again, however—certainly in Rwanda in 1994 and, depending on one's point of view, in Bosnia and Kosovo. Indeed, how one views NATO's intervention in Kosovo has a lot to do with whether one judges that genocide was at issue. Author Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz, concluded that what was happening in Kosovo warranted NATO's actions; others, including many in the churches who revere Wiesel's works, did not. One prominent military analyst argued that because Kosovo was "nothing like Auschwitz," what Serbian forces were doing should not be interpreted as genocidal. But surely to establish the Holocaust as the standard by which all genocides must be defined is to set the bar unthinkably high. Clearly, it will be necessary in the new century to spend time pondering one of the most haunting questions left by the last: What does it mean to say "never again" to genocide?

Judging the president

When Bill Clinton was acquitted in the U.S. Senate following the first impeachment trial ever of an elected president, the nation turned with relief from the long-running drama of sex, lies and politics precipitated by Clinton's affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. For the first few months of the year, however, a heated

public conversation continued on sexual ethics, personal morality and public responsibility.

Religious figures were highly visible in this debate. Philip Wogaman, pastor of the United Methodist church that Clinton attends, and Jean Bethke Elshtain, political and moral philosopher, squared off on TV's *Nightline* and in other venues to debate the ethics and politics of repentance and forgiveness. Similar debates took place in op-ed columns and talk shows. In all the debates, commentators struggled to clarify the many sets of issues. Especially challenging was how—and whether—to separate Clinton's moral failings from his political and legal liabilities.

Clinton's acquittal and continued popularity confounded his political enemies and prompted several of them to issue jeremiads about the moral state of the nation. William Bennett lamented the "death of outrage," and Representative Henry Hyde (R., Ill.) wondered if America was still worth fighting for. Conservative activist Paul Weyrich concluded that the "culture war" for traditional morality had been lost, and suggested that moral conservatives should rethink their engagement in politics. It was clear, at least, that Americans disliked moralistic politicians as much as they disliked duplicitous and adulterous ones.

Future historians may well use the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal as a window on various obsessions and tensions in late-20th-century liberal society. Litigiousness, shamelessness, a relentless interest in sex, a confusion about the boundaries of public and private life, the eclipse of honor, censoriousness coupled with a suspicion of moral authority—these were among the traits abundantly on display. That so much energy could be devoted to the sex scandal was perhaps also a sign that, with the economy booming and the cold war over, the nation was bereft of compelling political ideas and unable to focus on a political agenda.

Culture of violence

In 1999 as in other recent years, 13 children were shot to death every day in the U.S. But it was the horrifying shootings at affluent Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, that galvanized attention and prompted soul-searching about the causes of violence and the nation's tolerance of it. On April 20, teenagers Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed 12 of their fellow students and one teacher and wounded 13 people before killing themselves. What made them do it? Was it the influence of violent films and computer games, parental neglect, a misguided desire

for fame, social resentments, mental illness—or a combination of all of these causes and more?

Religious leaders responded to the Littleton massacre by urging parents to be more closely involved in the lives of adolescents. They called for an examination of the role models and violent images offered by popular culture, and urged students to treat those outside their immediate social circles with greater kindness and compassion.

Reports circulated about the Christian faith of some of the Columbine victims as expressed before and during the massacre. Many Christians hoped these students' testimony would offer a counterwitness of courage and goodness in the face of Klebold and Harris's nihilistic rage.

Gun violence invaded a church sanctuary in September when Larry Gene Ashbrook, 47, entered a Southern Baptist church in Fort Worth, Texas, armed with a semiautomatic weapon. Shouting "What you believe is all bull," he opened fire at a group of about 150 people, most of them teenagers. Ashbrook killed seven of the worshipers before fatally shooting himself.

Ironically, the young people gathered at Wedgewood Baptist Church were attending a rally for "See You at the Pole Day," an annual event begun in 1990 which encourages students to gather at the school flagpole to pray for their schools and for society. Such rallies have grown especially popular in the aftermath of the Littleton shootings.

Though Ashbrook was linked to an Aryan Nations-like hate group known as the Phineas Priesthood, he appears to have been socially isolated and mentally ill. His story reminded many people of the need to become more attentive to the needs of those suffering from mental illness.

The overwhelming concern with school safety that has grown out of the Littleton shootings and other violent episodes at schools has spawned a new profession: school safety consultant. Some school districts now spend more money on security than on textbooks—a grim sign of the culture of violence.

An agreement on justification

There's an old joke about a die-hard Lutheran who after death was surprised to find himself in hell. He was even more surprised to find Luther himself toiling away in the flames. "What happened?" he asked. "Bad news," replied Luther. "Works count after all." It's a hoary joke, and it reflects the even more ancient notion that whereas Protestants believe in salvation by grace through faith, Roman Catholics believe in salvation by works.

Jokes like that should be a little harder to tell after 1999. In a dramatic ecumenical breakthrough, representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on October 31 signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. The two groups declared that "all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation," and that new life in Christ is "solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith and can never merit in any way."

The agreement proclaimed "a consensus in basic truths" on how sinners are justified, or deemed righteous, in God's sight. In light of that consensus, Lutherans and Roman Catholics declared that the condemnations of one another on this point of doctrine no longer apply. Was the Reformation, then, a huge misunderstanding? No, though it is clear to scholars that misunderstandings and caricatures of the other side contributed to the 16th-century polemics on justification.

The Joint Declaration allows each tradition to retain its distinctive way of talking about growth in holiness and the persistence of sin in the life of the believer—issues that remain controversial and theologically complex. These and other issues will give Lutherans and Catholics a good deal to argue about, only now that argument takes place in the context of a shared confession that it's God who takes the initiative in the work of salvation.

National Council of Churches at the brink

Will the new century bring revitalization of the National Council of Churches or its end? Complaints and concerns culminated in crisis for the NCC just as the organization prepared to celebrate its 50th birthday. NCC leaders had asked for \$2 million in emergency donations from its member denominations to help cover a \$4 million shortfall. The United Methodist Church not only refused the plea for extra help, but in October suspended payment of a portion of its \$670,000 membership assessment, citing NCC's lack of fund balances to cover the debt, its absence of a

budget based on actual income and its lack of clarity on future liabilities. However, it restored the payment by year's end, satisfied with revisions in the budget.

The move intensified problems that had been brewing for years. Critics cited inappropriate financial oversight and accountability, including consultant fees that soared from \$750,000 to \$2.5 million. Other challenges include the internal tensions between the NCC and its largest department, Church World Service and Witness, which directs relief and development work. With 80 percent of the NCC budget and a mandate to spend its money for relief, CWCW is reluctant to share its dollars to help solve administrative crises in the larger organization.

At the beginning of '00, the NCC is posed for a financial year of transition. Plans include continued efforts to erase the deficit, a more streamlined structure, a smaller staff, and a general manager to manage administration of finances and human resources. This would allow the general secretary to focus on his or her role as chief spokesperson.

That role, held for nine years by Joan Brown Campbell, has been given to Robert Edgar, president of the Claremont School of Theology in California. The decision to hire Edgar, who is credited with pulling Claremont out of financial crisis, underlines the commitment to restructuring. Edgar acknowledged, "People see it [Claremont] as a model of how to salvage institutions in financial distress." He will be joined by NCC President Andrew Young, former UN ambassador and former mayor of Atlanta. Together the two leaders will determine the immediate fate of the NCC and whether its 35 member churches can build a credible ecumenical structure for a new era.

The World Council of Churches also experienced a financial crisis in 1999 and undertook cost-cutting efforts that entailed downsizing of staff and programs.

Division on homosexuality

The churches' stance on homosexuality—primarily on same-sex unions and ordination of gays and lesbians—created controversy in a number of denominations. Particularly in the United Methodist Church, the issue seemed to reach crisis proportions. For example, while the UMC's Board of Church and Society and its Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns both appealed to the Judicial Council, the church's highest legislative body, to ease the church's position on homosexuality, leaders of Good News, the denomination's conservative caucus, accused pro-gay Methodists of fomenting a "schismatic challenge." Yet those same

Good News leaders seemed to favor schism themselves in urging clergy and congregations that sanction same-sex unions “to formally withdraw from [Methodism’s] covenant and seek another avenue in which they can faithfully express their heartfelt beliefs.”

Most alarming to the conservatives were three instances in which church rules forbidding Methodist clergy from officiating at same-sex union ceremonies were deliberately defied. In January in Sacramento, California, 92 Methodist ministers, along with clergy from other denominations, took part in blessing the “holy union” of a lesbian couple in a service at St. Mark’s United Methodist Church; complaints were filed against many of the participants. Gregory Dell, pastor of Chicago’s Broadway UMC, who in 1998 performed a same-sex wedding ceremony, in March was found guilty of disobeying church law by a 10-3 vote of a clergy jury. He was suspended from the ministry, and an appeals committee upheld that decision; however, the committee limited the previously indefinite suspension to one year. Although Dell’s suspension could be lifted immediately were he to sign a document vowing not to conduct any more such union rituals, he has refused to do so, saying that “my ordination requires me to be in ministry to all persons without discrimination”; he has acknowledged that his stand leaves him “liable to the charge again.” A more severe punishment was meted out to Pastor Jimmy Creech, who in November was defrocked for officiating at an April same-sex union ceremony in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Creech had been acquitted in a 1998 church trial on the same issue, but that was before the Judicial Council had ruled that the prohibition in the church’s Social Principles against clergy performing same-sex union ceremonies is not a mere guideline but has the force of law.

The Hudson River Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted overwhelmingly to allow ministers to perform same-sex holy unions, provided that they are not called marriages, and a church tribunal upheld the right of the First Presbyterian Church of Stamford, Connecticut, to elect an openly gay elder to its governing board. On the matter of gay ordination, the PCUSA’s General Assembly opted for a measure calling for two years of study on the issue. That “decision not to decide” seemed to be called into question, however, when a church tribunal ruled in November that a group of Presbyterian congregations in New Jersey did not violate church laws by accepting a gay man as a candidate for ordination.

Among Southern Baptists, two Georgia churches were expelled for allowing gay laypeople to take leadership roles; never before in the Georgia convention’s 177

years had a member church been banned. In an unprecedented move, regional authorities of the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. moved to expel four churches deemed too tolerant of homosexuality. Although the matter is still under adjudication, the four churches were given 18 months to obtain linkage with another region, however distant. Nongeographical affiliation of that sort would also be a precedent for the denomination.

Interfaith conflict and religious persecution

Interfaith conflict flared fiercely in India, where Hindu nationalists inflicted a series of attacks on Christians and their churches. Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons were burned to death in their vehicle on January 23 in a village in the state of Orissa. In March almost 1,500 Christians were made homeless when their homes were set on fire in another Orissa village. Many Indians, though not condoning the acts of violence, claimed that the Christian minority uses enticements to win converts and is overzealous in its proselytizing efforts. When Pope John Paul II visited India and made a plea for religious freedom, militant Hindu leaders accused him of abusing the country's hospitality.

Communist China, whose repressive treatment of Christian groups has long been a salient part of its unsavory human rights record, cracked down hard on Falun Gong, a popular homegrown spiritual sect that emphasizes meditation, physical exercise and traditional Chinese health practices. The government banned the sect and jailed many of its members, who have received sentences of up to 18 years. Though Falun Gong's leaders insist that it is nonpolitical, the Chinese authorities nonetheless fear that the group could become a political force.

Early in the year, Christian-Muslim strife in Indonesia left a death toll of several dozen, and both mosques and churches were burned. The violence was a kind of foretaste of the September slaughter and destruction in East Timor, which Indonesia had annexed in 1975 but which had voted for independence on August 30. Religious zeal was hardly the sole motivation of the anti-independence militias (or their allies in the Indonesian military), but East Timor is the only predominantly Christian territory in the Indonesian archipelago, and Roman Catholic institutions seemed to be singled out for attack. A number of priests and nuns were killed, and churches and convents were torched. Bishop Carlos Belo, co-winner of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize, had to flee for his life; his home was burned. Then at year's end, Christian-Muslim violence broke out anew on the Indonesian island of Ambon, leaving nearly

40 dead and bringing Ambon's total for the year in such clashes to some 800 lives. In addition to the December deaths, Ambon's main Christian church and a Muslim mosque were set on fire.

In predominantly Muslim Sudan, the government continued its campaign of bulldozing, on the slightest of pretexts, churches and schools, both Protestant and Catholic. In Kosovo, by contrast, the victims were Muslims, and there the destruction was of human life—much human life—as well as property at the hands of the predominantly Orthodox Serbs. On the brighter side, Russia's Constitutional Court handed down a liberal interpretation of a much-disputed 1997 law that governs religious activity in the country. Though far from guaranteeing full-scale religious liberty, the ruling from Russia's highest legal authority will make it easier for some religious groups to operate in Russia. And the Protestant-Catholic conflict in Northern Ireland showed signs of coming to an end at long last, as a peace agreement reached in '98 began to be implemented and on December 2 a coalition government took office.

Evolution and its critics

The debate on evolution captured public attention when the Kansas Board of Education adopted a new science curriculum that removed requirements on teaching evolution. Although local Kansas school boards can still permit the theory of evolution to be taught, it will not be included in state assessment tests. Teachers with limited class time and boards with tight budgets will be less likely to teach evolution.

Recent efforts to promote creationism began in 1968, when Arkansas passed a law forbidding schools to teach evolution. The U.S. Supreme Court struck that law down. In 1981, creationists tried again, proposing a law that required teachers to give “balanced treatment” to evolutionism and creationism. The Supreme Court declared that the law violated the First Amendment.

With the Kansas decision, creationists seem to have adopted a new strategy—instead of trying to include creationism, they would remove the offensive evolution theory. The action in Kansas sparked similar efforts in other states. In Kentucky, officials moved to replace the word “evolution” with “biological change over time.” In New Mexico, however, the Board of Education made a countermove, effectively excluding creationism by limiting the statewide science curriculum to the

teaching of evolution as an explanation for humankind's origins.

One Kansas science teacher protested the board's decision, saying that the two theories "don't have to be mutually exclusive." She and others are eager to move the discussion beyond the 19th-century controversy and inform it with the new insights of information theory, astrophysics and molecular biology.

Globalization and its discontents

More than 30,000 protesters gathered at the World Trade Organization's meeting in Seattle in November and made sure that the problems associated with free trade and economic globalization were not ignored. The demonstrators' primary concern was for the environment and the welfare of workers and the poor.

The protesters charged that unregulated trade has harmed food safety, threatened endangered species and worsened air quality. They argued that globalization of the market has not protected human rights, stopped child labor or the economic exploitation of women, or narrowed the gap between rich and poor. Labor unions joined in the demonstrations, protesting the loss of U.S. jobs and insisting that laborers in underdeveloped countries be given the right to unionize. The protests were accompanied by some destruction of property and looting, and they were met by an unprepared and sometimes undisciplined police force.

The moral and political issues of world trade are, of course, more complex than any protest poster. The concerns of less-developed countries to gain a place in the world market are often at odds with the interests of environmentalists in the U.S. and Europe. Nevertheless, the demonstrations served to spark an important debate on how to regulate the all-embracing phenomenon of global capitalism. How much power should intergovernmental organizations like the WTO wield? How should they operate? To whom are they accountable? If the protesters did not have the answers, they were asking the right questions.

Into the next millennium

Millennium fever seized the body social this past year, and it's hard to decide what was more bothersome, the endless top-ten and top-hundred lists, the Y2K chatter, or the apocalypse-flavored novels of the Religious Right. Many folk seemed to feel that the dramatic change of date was momentous, but were not sure why. Without a deep sense that time is the unfolding of God's purposes, without what theologians

would call a “metanarrative” of human history, much of the interest in the millennium seemed forced and artificial.

But we don’t mean to be millennium scrooges. The millennium (although we count it’s start at 2001) is indeed an occasion for celebration and reflection. It’s the 2000th anniversary, give or take a few years, of the birth of Jesus, whom Christians call the Christ—a truly momentous moment in the world’s history. So, yes, continue the celebration throughout the year, as we will in this magazine, cheered by a verse from our favorite millennium hymn: “Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.”

And in other developments . . .

The Southern Baptist Convention’s efforts to proselytize Jews, Hindus and Muslims met with considerable opposition, much of it from Christians. And when the SBC announced that it would be sending some 100,000 Southern Baptists to Chicago next summer to conduct a door-to-door campaign seeking converts, the plan was denounced by Chicago Jewish, Protestant and Catholic leaders. The divisive issue of school vouchers continued to make news; though the Florida legislature voted for the vouchers (the nation’s first such statewide program), federal judges upheld Maine’s ban on them and halted Cleveland’s use of them. In a rare move for such a high-ranking cleric, Archbishop Spyridon, head of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, resigned in the wake of a three-year campaign against him by both bishops and laypeople who viewed him as autocratic and unattuned to American ways. A contrite Henry J. Lyons, former president of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., was sentenced to five and a half years in prison on Florida convictions of grand theft and racketeering. Catholic scholars pondered the future of free inquiry in Catholic universities in the U.S. after the nation’s bishops decided to require theologians to obtain a mandate certifying that what they teach is authentic Catholic doctrine. Israel’s decision to allow construction of a mosque next to the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth led to increased tensions in the Holy Land. An international treaty against landmines went into effect. Church relief agencies scrambled to deliver aid following a number of devastating natural disasters, some with death tolls in the thousands: earthquakes in Turkey and Taiwan, hurricanes on the U.S. east coast (especially North Carolina), floods and mudslides in Venezuela. Finally, in a manifestation of millennial madness in Jerusalem, last-days cult leader Kim Miller of Denver vowed to kill himself, in the belief that he would be resurrected in three days—at the new year. As they have in other cases relating to millenarian

groups, Israeli authorities hustled Miller and his cohorts out of the country.

Deaths: James Ashbrook, a pioneer in the area of religion and science; Frank Baker, a leading authority on Methodism; Daisy Bates, civil rights activist; Johan Christiaan Beker, New Testament scholar; Jerald C. Brauer, church historian and former dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School; liberationist Archbishop Hélder Pessoa Câmara of Brazil; Oscar Cullman, Protestant theologian and New Testament scholar; James S. Farmer, founder of the Congress of Racial Equality; Cardinal Basil Hume of Great Britain; Karekin I, leader of the Armenian Apostolic Church; Wayne Oates, a pioneer in the field of pastoral care and counseling; reformer Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez of Chile.

Some of the year's notable books: *Saving and Secular Faith*, by B. A. Gerrish (Fortress); *The Holocaust in American Life*, by Peter Novick (Houghton Mifflin); *Morality and Contemporary Warfare*, by James Turner Johnson (Yale University Press); *The Emphatic Christian Center: Reforming Christian Political Practice*, by Kyle A. Pasewark and Garrett E. Paul (Abingdon); *Radical Orthodoxy*, edited by John Milbank et al. (Routledge); *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust*, by Victoria J. Barnett (Greenwood); *American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King Jr.*, edited by Michael Warner (Library of America); *Saint Augustine*, by Garry Wills (Viking); *Augustine Through the Ages*, edited by Allan Fitzgerald et al. (Eerdmans); *Disgrace*, by J. M. Coetzee (Viking).