Victory of peace

by Miroslav Volf in the June 30, 1999 issue

The war over Kosovo has ended. While it was still raging, it was justified primarily in terms of the need to protect ethnic Albanians from egregious human rights abuses by the Milosevic regime. In a speech titled "Kosovo and the End of the Nation-State," President Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic put the justification eloquently: "This is probably the first war that has not been waged in the name of 'national interests,' but rather in the name of principles and values. . . . The alliance has acted out of respect for human rights as both conscience and international legal documents dictate. This is an important precedent for the future."

Havel's deserved reputation as public moral conscience of the West notwithstanding, one can plausibly argue that international legal documents prohibited the intervention more than they dictated it (it did not have a UN mandate), and that the alliance acted less for ethical reasons than out of strategic interests (warnings that an intervention would ensue if Milosevic overplayed his hand in Kosovo were issued already in 1992 as atrocities were being committed in Croatia and Bosnia, but NATO had no intention of intervening). And looking at the result, one may well question the wisdom of making the NATO intervention a precedent for the future.

The reasons for the intervention be as they may, in the political rhetoric of NATO countries, appeals to human rights abounded. They were employed because they are good for fighting. Now that the war is over and the animosities between the ethnic Albanians and Serbs have reached almost unsurpassable heights, we need more than appeals to human rights. We need a vision of reconciliation. Whether as a single political entity or not, ethnic Albanians and Serbs will continue to live as neighbors. Without a vision of reconciliation they will be able neither to start nor to sustain a sorely needed but laborious process of social healing.

Understandably, reconciliation is far from the minds of those surveying the wreckage of their burned and bombed homes or mourning their dead. But reconciliation ought not be far from the minds of Christians who are concerned about the conflict. Given the depths of the estrangement, it may be wise to use the word sparingly. But it

would be foolish not to let reconciliation organize all actions. The vision of reconciliation is inscribed at the very heart of the Christian tradition. The God of Jesus Christ, who protects the weak from the oppressive hand of the strong, is also the God who died for the ungodly in order to bring them into divine communion. The God who demands justice is the God who commands that we love our neighbors, even when they have become our enemies. Though in no way indifferent toward the distinction between good and evil, this God of indiscriminate love lets the sun shine on both the good and the evil.

Properly understood, this is a scandalous claim. It says this: no deed is imaginable that would put persons outside the sphere of God's love and therefore no crime is conceivable that would exempt us from the obligation to love those who committed it. We may find it difficult or even impossible to love such persons; our love may have to be demanding and unyielding love, even fiercely fighting love. And certainly, for reconciliation to take place, evildoers will need to turn from their evil ways. But none of this calls into question the obligation to love the evildoer unconditionally.

Though scandalous, the demand of indiscriminate love is also full of promise for social healing. Consider some of its implications. First, if others matter to us, then we will guard against demonizing them—a tendency generated by both the logic of struggle and the memory of evil suffered. We should be vigilant against portraying the cause and actions of the perpetrators as more evil than they in fact are. If we are committed to loving them, we will seek to be truthful rather than let the truth be a casualty of our animosity.

Second, if the perpetrators matter to us, we will seek to transcend our perspective on them and on our relationship to them, and take into account their perspective; we will be willing seriously to entertain the possibility that there *may* be some truth in their way of seeing things and some justice in their cause.

Third, having imaginatively made room for the perspective of the perpetrators in ourselves, we will be more ready to arrange our own identity and behavior, and therefore also our space, in a way that makes at least some room for them.

Fourth, our struggle will not be an all-or-nothing affair. As we pursue the cause of justice, we will also be willing to forego some of our rights for the sake of a common life. In an important sense, this is unjust. Others have violated our rights, but instead of simply reclaiming what is ours we look for ways to accommodate them. It takes

precisely such "injustice" to heal broken relationships.

Finally, if the perpetrators matter to us, our victory over them will matter less than the *victory of peace between us*. The logic of struggle demands victory, and often some kind of victory is essential to stop violence. But though love rejoices over victims' liberation, it celebrates not so much perpetrators' defeat as the reconciliation between perpetrators who have been delivered from captivity to evil and victims who have been freed from oppression.

Belief in the God who died for the ungodly in order to take them up into divine communion places human conflicts within the horizon of reconciliation. It matters immensely that justice is upheld. But the healing of people and their relationships matters more. Is such healing possible in Kosovo? Having celebrated the victory over the Serbs, will we come to celebrate a victory of peace between ethnic Albanians and the Serbs? If we can sustain the vision of reconciliation and act under its guidance, we will have sown the seed of a miracle.