

In War's Aftermath

Five years ago the U.S. invaded Kosovo to bring freedom. Today churches there are growing—but Christians who are sharing Christ with the nation's Muslim majority face a challenge.

In March 1999 the United States and its NATO allies took military action in Serbia, a country in southeastern Europe along the Adriatic Sea. Air strikes were launched in the Serbian province of Kosovo to quash a large-scale offensive by President Slobodan Milosevic against his country's ethnic Albanians.

An estimated 850,000 Kosovars had fled the Serbian forces, creating a humanitarian catastrophe that infringed on the security of neighboring countries. After 11 weeks of daily bombings against his military, Milosevic signed a U.N.-approved peace agreement with NATO on June 3.

The purpose of the campaign, U.S. and NATO leaders said, was not only to stabilize a volatile region but also to instill democracy and freedom into a totalitarian society.

Since the ouster of the Serbian army from Kosovo, the former province has been a U.N. protectorate striving to become independent. But Serbia still claims the area, and the U.N. peacekeeping force lingers, leaving Kosovo in a state of "incompleteness" that paralyzes its economy and human resources.

Charisma recently visited Pristina, the capital, to find out if the tiny Christian community in Kosovo is enjoying today the freedom the Western military powers set out to establish.

A Foothold for Christianity

Each Sunday some 100-120 believers fill to capacity the sanctuary of Fellowship of the Lord's People, a Pentecostal church in downtown Pristina. Such a crowd makes that body of believers, by a wide margin, the largest Protestant church in the country. It is also the oldest one, established in 1984 as the first Protestant Albanian church in modern-day Kosovo.

Its two pastors, brothers Artur and Driton Krasniqi, although not yet 30 years of age, represent the Protestant community to the provisional government and the ruling U.N. Mission. Both pastors told Charisma that changes in Kosovo today are paramount.

"In the history of Kosovo there has never been such freedom as today," Artur says.

"Under Serbian rule [until 1999]," Driton explains, "there were seven Albanian Protestant [meaning Pentecostal, charismatic or evangelical] churches in Kosovo, all suffering from ongoing persecution. Today there are some 25 churches and church plants, and there is freedom, even though it is not perfect. Then there were 150-200 believers. Now there are at least 10 times more."

Still, leaving Islam means breaking with family and national traditions. In many towns and most villages such a step provokes harassment and social rejection. Earlier this year, in a documentary about Kosovo Albanians who were alleged to have changed religions, no names were given and those who claimed to be converts were filmed from behind.

In June 2002, Banush Elezi of Fellowship of the Lord's People started House of Hope in Vushtrri, a town of 50,000, as a way to offer computer and English classes, show films and organize debates for residents.

"Lots of young people used to come," Elezi told Charisma. "But after a handful of kids converted to Christianity the place became known as a church. Now many are afraid to come."

Elezi adds that some continue to visit House of Hope but no longer greet him in the street.

"You don't get beaten for being a Christian any longer, but people still slander you," he continues. "There is a rumor in town that I pay for conversions!"

He managed a wry smile with this statement. At the time of Charisma's visit, Elezi was without regular financial support from his church, had no job and could not pay his own rent.

Tenuous Religious Freedom

Kosovo's political leaders downplay the role of Islam in the country to gain support from Western, predominantly Christian, nations. Support from the West is necessary to maintain independence and to secure European Union (EU) and NATO memberships. These ambitions unite all political forces and permeate all political strategies in the country.

Prime Minister Bajram Rexhepi of Kosovo told Charisma that it would be "an illusion for the new, small countries on the Balkans to believe that they could make it without NATO and

the EU.”

The prime minister clearly stated that there must be a complete separation between religion and state in independent Kosovo and that “no religion will be able to influence the [future] constitution.” He also emphasized that there will be complete freedom of religion for “all four Kosovo religions: Islam, Catholicism, Serbian Orthodoxy and the small Protestant community.”

Regarding religion, Rexhepi claims the Kosovo Muslims are “mostly secular and very tolerant” and that many celebrate Christmas.

Rexhepi, himself a “secular Muslim,” is considered by Kosovo Protestants to be a friend, although the pledged recognition of Protestantism has yet to be tested. By contrast, Muslim countries elsewhere in the world drift toward antagonism of other religions.

Protestants historically have always suffered persecution in the Balkans, mainly at the hands of the Orthodox Church and to a degree the Catholic Church. Under Serbian rule Albanian Protestants and missionaries to Kosovo were subject to constant surveillance and harassment. Orthodox and Muslim countries both tend to view Protestants as “Western spies.”

“Even after the NATO liberation of Kosovo, the Protestants were at first marginalized,” Artur explains. “We had no representative on the first committee drafting the new law on religion, but after pressure from friends in America, and with the support of our prime minister, I was invited to join a second committee.”

Last year Rexhepi participated in the Christmas celebration of the Pentecostal church—a historic gesture for which Artur is deeply grateful. In his view, however, the religious neutrality of the state would also require the leading politicians to visit mosques.

“Downplaying Islam to please the West can be counterproductive. It may provoke extremism as a reaction,” he explains.

Artur is also apprehensive about an excessive faith in tolerance held by his country’s leaders as well as in the international community. Politically, he reasons, religious freedom cannot be based on tolerance. He believes it must be based on righteous laws and “respect for the law.”

“Kosovo never experienced the rule of law, and it is time we start educating ourselves because tolerance is not enough,” he says. “We Albanians pride ourselves at being religiously tolerant, but I think it is more a matter of being indifferent and ignorant.

“The tolerant say: ‘All religions are the same,’ and, ‘The Quran and the Bible are equal,’” he continues. “No sincere Christian or Muslim would agree to such statements.

“Unless we learn to respect the law, Kosovo might turn more Islamic after independence,” he adds. “There are such ambitions.”

The Pentecostal pastor also questions American and European support for Islam in Kosovo.

“To show off their tolerance, Westerners call Islam a ‘religion of peace’ and co-finance Muslim projects,” he says. “So our countrymen say to us local Christians, ‘See, Islam is a good-enough religion.’ In the name of tolerance there has even been international church support for the building of a new mosque in Kosovo.”

Artur says he wishes the international community would stop caring more about Islam in Kosovo than the Kosovar leaders do.

“As Christians we should be aware that even though most Kosovo Muslims are secularized, Islam is still a spiritual force. During the month of Ramadan, when also nominal Muslims fast and pray, we notice a significant increase of weakness and confusion among the Christians in Kosovo,” he points out.

Artur claims that the new leader of the Islamic community in Kosovo, Naim Trnava, is a radical. Groups of young mujahedin, or Islamic warriors, can be seen in the streets of Pristina and other cities.

Struggling to Evangelize

Today, some 2 million Kosovars are Albanian, out of a total of about 2.2 million inhabitants. Half the 200,000 Serbs that were in Kosovo left with their army. Possibly as many as 150,000 Kosovar Gypsies were expelled, most of them by the Albanians.

Church growth has been significant in Kosovo, but still below expectations, pastor Driton told Charisma.

“In the face of war, the religious interest peaked, but now money—or rather, the lack of money—is topmost on people’s minds,” he notes.

Kosovars are poorer today than before the war, and the economy is going down, not up. Approximately 60 percent are jobless. Hope in the future is waning, according to official surveys.

In 2005 the United Nations will evaluate the future status of Kosovo. To the Kosovo Albanians there is no alternative to independence. They say any attempt by the United Nations to force them back “under Serbia” would cause a new war.

In the meantime, Kosovo’s Pentecostals evangelize while they can. Their most fruitful efforts are based on personal contacts that develop into friendships.

“Muslims anywhere in the world rarely change religions on intellectual grounds,” Driton says. “Conversions are based on miracles or friendship. In Kosovo people usually come to the Lord through friends.”

Christians do not evangelize in the streets or door-to-door to avoid being confused with Jehovah’s Witnesses and other cults that have come to Kosovo in the wake of freedom. Instead they try to innovate, to create nonexclusive meeting places.

Because of Kosovo’s political status as a U.N. protectorate, English has become a semiofficial language. Thousands of internationals live in the country. Half of Fellowship of the Lord’s People is non-Kosovar, and all services are bilingual.

Most foreign believers are African or African American, and when the international choir enters the stage to lead in worship half-an-hour into the Sunday service, the gospel rhythms—ostensibly, at least—turn Kosovo into the Western country it aspires to be.

Tomas Dixon is a journalist based in Sweden. He has reported for Charisma from numerous European countries, including Spain, Austria and Germany.