



# CNI

## COMMENT - Remembering Srebrenica

**The Rt Rev Dr Bob Gillies, Scottish  
Episcopal Bishop of Aberdeen & Orkney  
writes -**

It may seem a long way away. It may seem like a long time ago. But we must never forget the massacre of Srebrenica twenty years ago. On 13th July 1995 eight thousand three hundred and seventy two unarmed men and boys were systematically killed in, or near, the Bosnian town of Srebrenica by attacking Bosnian Serb forces. It represents the biggest single act of killing on European soil since the Second World War.

They were killed because they were Muslim. They met their fate because the United Nations Peace Keeping force, and the United Nations more generally, failed to protect them. Whilst the men and boys were killed women and girls were raped.

On 5th July the Serbian forces had begun their assault on the town. Successive requests for air protection failed through a combination of maladministration and negotiation over thirty captured hostages.

How could this happen in a country where only eleven years previously, in 1984, Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean had skated to Maurice Ravel's Bolero for their Gold Medal in the Winter Olympic Games at Sarajevo? How could this happen barely more than a day's drive from Vienna and from places where many of us will have gone on holiday?

It stands as a huge condemnation of religious intolerance that those who sought the extermination were Christians seeking to 'cleanse' (and what an awful word that is in this context) Bosnia Herzegovina of the Muslims who had lived alongside them for years. No mitigation can be sought in favour of those who aimed their guns at their victims and sex-slaved the women.

It was a poor hour for the United Nations as well. The isolated Dutch Peace Keepers on the ground were out-manoeuvred and manipulated into compliance. The UN at large similarly failed to be there and failed to put pressure when most needed.

The experience of Srebrenica shows the worst excesses that arise when religious forces (and I write as a committed Christian) team up with military campaigns. The alliance of religious fervour and supposed religious purity with those seeking political power is a dangerous and toxic mix.

In its worst expressions such a mix shows how normally rational and sane individuals who would in most other contexts show civility and courtesy demonise the difference they see in another and seek that person's demise and destruction.

Since Srebrenica the same sort of religious fanaticism combined with national identity has shown itself in Syria – Iraq. It's there as well in the chronic violence over land in Israel – Palestine and, nearer home, was there, in part at least, within the conflicts of Northern Ireland.

The question arises as to what to do about such destructiveness. First of all, one must never forget such events. No society on earth is immune from destructive urges. If we think this could not happen in our country and in our time then we ignore the lessons of history. Humanity can, all too easily, anywhere, anytime, sink into a cesspit of violence. So, never forget and never deny the bad things.

Second, those who have a moderate and a moderating voice should never be afraid to speak in favour of tolerance and harmony, and never give any support to those who might tend to violence.

And third, where there is opportunity for cooperation between ethnically different and religiously different communities it should be supported and encouraged. I am proud that one of the churches for which I have responsibility in Aberdeen works totally in tandem with the Mosque that stands on the same ground as it does.

We have received criticism from a minority on account of the cooperation, of which we are rightly proud, between Christian and Muslim communities. What our critics say is misjudged. To hold firmly to one's Christian beliefs means that one welcomes the neighbour, and greets him or her as someone made in the image and likeness of God. St Benedict some 1400 years ago said that the Christian should welcome the other person as though they were Christ himself.

Whilst I will always defend dearly the Christian faith that I hold I will always stretch out my hand to the other person as an expression of my

belief, irrespective of whatever faith persuasion the other person might, or might not, have.

It is this moderate and moderating expression of religious faith which shows a better way than the pursuit of religious purity. Most especially if this religious purity is linked with a similarly purist view of ethnic or national identity. Such views become calamitously worse when allied with political and / or military ambition.

As individuals we might think we can do nothing to stop the advance of more compelling forces even if we think they are wrong. But it is, I am firmly convinced, that by the small acts of local kindness and generosity that big things are achieved. And of equal importance, it is through the small and local good acts of human generosity, one to the other, that more violent tendencies are held at bay and sublimated by our kindness.

Remember Srebrenica. Learn the lessons and hope for the future.

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