



# FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

## Violence and Peace by Lyndsey Medford



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Throughout the 1990s, wars and ethnic conflicts ravaged the former state of Yugoslavia until a peace agreement was finally reached.

What can these conflicts and their aftermath teach us about the nature of violence and peace? As Christians, how do we strive for peace in the face of violence?

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This issue of FAITHLINK is the first in a series of four lessons during this Advent season inspired by the book *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, by Miroslav Volf.

### The Wars

Last spring, my husband, Nate, and I traveled to Croatia for vacation. One afternoon during our trip we ventured to a family farm and spent the day tasting the fruits of the family's labors. As our host, who was in his late twenties, drove us back into the city, Nate asked him about the country's history. He replied that his earliest memories included watching the news of the war ravaging the country and "wondering where my father was." He continued, "At the end of the war, he came back from the fighting; I was afraid of him because he had a beard and I didn't recognize him. He returned to work on the farm and got his life back. Some of the other soldiers never have."

It's been 24 years since the official end of the Yugoslav wars that eventually led to the formation of the countries of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. The wars were sparked by several rival ethnic groups who clashed over various nationalist independence movements after living as neighbors for centuries. These struggles were spurred on by more recent political resentments, religious differences, and quests for vengeance over generations-old wrongs.

These ethnic differences had been suppressed under the Yugoslavian Communist regime, whose power and cohesion slowly began to erode after the death of Josip Broz Tito, the man who ruled as a dictator for more than 35 years until his death in 1980. Following his death, opportunistic politicians began to exaggerate nationalist sentiments as a strategy to grab power. With these rifts emerging, economic crises led to declarations of independence by both Croatia and Slovenia, who were then followed by other ethnic nationalist groups.

Soldiers from each ethnic group formed armies, but the Croats, Serbs, and Bosnians were the largest and most powerful groups. In contrast, ethnic Albanians and Muslim Bosniaks were relatively small minorities and therefore constituted the bulk of the 2.3 million international refugees created by the wars that followed.

These wars were marked by immense civilian casualties, genocidal massacres, mass rape, and other war crimes. Over 130,000 people died as a result of these conflicts. In fact, the term “ethnic cleansing” was invented by Serbs who attempted to kill, rape, or deport all Croats and Muslim Bosniaks living in Bosnia. Unsurprisingly, these acts of violence further inflamed hatreds on all sides. In several of the conflicts, the United States, the United Nations, or NATO intervened with either diplomatic strategies or military might in order to force cease-fires and peace agreements.

As a result of the conflicts, millions of people were displaced from their homes, and the entire region suffered severe economic losses from the costs of the fighting, destruction of property, years of destabilization, and ongoing trauma.

**REFLECT:**

- Do any members of our group remember hearing about the Yugoslav wars in the news? What images, words, or ideas do you associate with these conflicts?
- Sometimes it is said that ethnic rivalries in the Balkans are “centuries old,” but the various groups involved in these wars had lived as neighbors for decades. How do you think people who

had lived in peace for 75 years came to hate their neighbors enough to perpetrate such horrific violence?

## *Exclusion & Embrace*

In 2000, *Christianity Today* named *Exclusion & Embrace* by theologian Miroslav Volf one of the most influential books of the 20th century. Volf, a Croatian living in the United States, wrote the book only a few years after the end of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Volf had presented a paper comparing God’s love to an “embrace,” but found himself caught when he asked the question, “But could you embrace a Chetnik (a Serbian fighter)?” His search for an answer in light of Christ’s life and death lead him to write *Exclusion & Embrace*.

After witnessing massacres of his own people, Volf’s advocacy of nonviolence is profound. Yet at the same time, he reminds us:

Jesus’s mission certainly did not consist merely in passively receiving violence. . . . The pure negativity of nonviolence is barren. . . . At best, oppressors can safely disregard it; at worst, they can see themselves indirectly justified by it. To be significant, nonviolence must be part of a larger strategy of combating the system of terror.

(from *Exclusion & Embrace*,  
*Revised and Updated*, page 288)

In other words, the opposite of *war* is not *nonviolence*; the opposite of war is *peacemaking*. This includes pursuing both justice and restoration for the oppressed and repentance by oppressors. Beyond this, peacemaking means crafting a new way forward for everyone with the desire to live together in love. In the United States, our schools, our media, and even our politicians often present us with idealized philosophies of nonviolence, but without effective strategies for fighting injustice and the willingness to make immense sacrifices, nonviolence isn’t really a tool for change, only an endorsement of the status quo.

Those who lived through the suffering and hatred might still struggle to endorse a theology of non-violence as completely as Volf does. International trials for the war crimes committed during the Yugoslav wars ended only two years ago. Young men who fought in the wars are now middle-aged. Both the Serbians and Croatians who fought against each other considered themselves Christians and believed God was on their side.

Volf admits that following Jesus' way is costly. For those who have endured atrocities, only the promise of God's judgment can offer hope that true justice will be done and that true love of the enemy is possible.

During Advent, we may be tempted to domesticate the idea of peace. Those of us who live fairly comfortable lives can forget that peace is often hard-

won by those who oppose injustice, those who stand in the gap in conflict, and those who forgive for the sake of the future. We can also forget that many people—even some in our own country—long for peace but do not currently experience it. For us, a commitment to peacemaking is a commitment to the hard work of justice and healing.

*REFLECT:*

- How do you understand nonviolence as a tactic in a larger strategy of justice-seeking and peacemaking? How can it serve as a positive good, rather than simply the absence of action?
- Do you consider yourself a pacifist (a participant in absolute nonviolence)? Why or why not?
- Have you ever participated in a nonviolent action for change? What were you working toward? What happened?

## The Nations Today

Today the Balkan states that formerly made up Yugoslavia continue their process of recovery from war and its traumas. Nevertheless, the wounds of war and the lingering ethnic tensions continue to influence events on the world stage.

The Trump administration recently appointed the US ambassador to Germany as a special envoy to Serbia and Kosovo. Kosovo's ethnic Albanian leaders declared independence from Serbia in 2008, and its sovereignty has been recognized by the United Nations and the United States, but not by Serbia, Russia, China, and others.

Of the seven nations that emerged from Yugoslavia, only Croatia and Slovenia belong to the European Union, and Croatia has not yet fulfilled the requirements to adopt the euro currency. The remaining countries are in talks to join the EU, but have not met economic and/or democratic development requirements for membership. Meanwhile, Serbian leaders in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia maintain close ties to Russia.

These alliances have far-reaching consequences, including for thousands of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other nations. For instance, as more of these refugees arrive in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the European Union has granted millions of dollars to neighboring Croatia to strengthen its border security. Critics say Croatia and the EU are neglecting their humanitarian responsibilities and leaving poorer nations to deal with global problems the EU has the luxury to ignore.

*REFLECT:*

- What do Christianity and the Bible have to say about the unintended or generations-long effects of violence?
- How might a country with recent memories of violence be both gifted and challenged in resettling refugees from other places?

## Core Bible Passages

This week’s lectionary passages remind us that peace is more than simply the absence of violence—and that it is costly. **Isaiah 2:1-5** prophesies that “many peoples” will “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (**verse 4**, NRSV). They are no longer able to “train for war” (**verse 4**, NIV)—not because of human-brokered peace agreements, but because God’s judgment brings true justice to the earth.

In **Romans 13**, Paul tells the Romans to remain under the authority of the Roman government and to pay their taxes. But Paul also goes further: “Don’t be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law” (**verse 8**). Christians’ allegiance to the kingdom of God means a transformation of our relationships, not just staying out of trouble. Paul argues that Christians’ lives of love might even have a subversive effect as they live at peace with the empire: “The night is almost over, and the day is near. So let’s get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light” (**verse 12**).

**Matthew 24** reminds us that Advent is traditionally a season of longing and expectation in the midst of a world of violence and heartbreak. Even as Jesus describes a fearsome day of judgment, his command to “keep watch” (**verse 42**, NIV) can give us hope that the world will be restored and the perpetrators of violence will be brought to justice.

### REFLECT:

- What does Paul’s reference to the “weapons of light” mean in the context of submitting to authority?
- Miroslav Volf points out that the actions of a loving God might *feel* violent to unrepentant, untransformed humans. Do you believe God’s judgment involves violence?

## United Methodist Perspective

The United Methodist Social Principles state, “We believe war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ. . . . As disciples of Christ, we are called to love our enemies, seek justice, and serve as reconcilers of conflict” (from “The World Community,” ¶165.C). United Methodists around the world are committed to a robust ethic of peace-building, including both conflict resolution and the broader work of creating conditions of justice where peace can flourish.

After the end of the Yugoslav wars, the United Methodist Committee on Relief soon arrived to help those affected by the violence rebuild homes, infrastructure, and public buildings such as hospitals. These projects included boosting affected economies by procuring building materials locally and then offering these materials to families in order to rebuild their own homes. Another project helped a divided city rebuild the local hospital as a means to foster cooperation between formerly warring ethnic groups. This meant that the bulk of the work on the construction of the building was actually part of the social project of bridging conflict in the wake of violence.

Other UMCOR projects in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia included educational programs in refugee camps, programs for bringing youth together across ethnic divides, economic development activities for women, helping people breed better livestock for food and income, and partnering with organizations that helped women heal after sexual violence.

### REFLECT:

- Do our Christian peace-building responsibilities extend to conflicts in which we’re not directly involved? Why or why not?
- Where do you see United Methodist organizations (including your church) working toward peace?

## Helpful Links

- Understand the Balkan ethnic conflicts more in-depth and learn about ongoing reconciliation efforts at 21st Century Global Dynamics Initiative of the University of California, Santa Barbara: <https://www.21global.ucsb.edu/global-e/september-2018/reconciliation-balkans-twenty-years-after-yugoslav-wars-what-went-wrong>
- Learn more about United Methodist responses to the Yugoslav wars at ReliefWeb: <https://reliefweb.int/report/bosnia-and-herzegovina/united-methodist-volunteers-see-wars-effects-bosnia>
- View a resource page at United for Peace and Justice to discover organizations that offer trainings in nonviolent direct action: <http://www.unitedforpeace.org/resources/non-violent-direct-action-civil-disobedience-training/>
- Find the book *Exclusion & Embrace, Revised and Updated: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, by Miroslav Volf, at Cokesbury: <https://www.cokesbury.com/p-9781501861079-Exclusion-and-Embrace--Revised-and-Updated-1-1-1>

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Next Week in **FaithLink**  
Connecting Faith and Life

## Deception and Truth

by Jill M. Johnson

Differing concepts of truth and deception have always shaped our cultural and political conversations. During this time of Advent, what can we learn from the birth narratives of Jesus about both truth and deception? As Christians, how do we recognize deception and embrace truth?

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## Opening Prayer

Dear God, as we remember a recent time of violence and hatred, we're mindful of the blessing that we have arrived here in safety. As we prepare today, we think of our enemies and of the people we are tempted to fear [*pause for a moment*] and we pray for their well-being and their peace. Thank you for bringing true justice, reconciliation, and peace to our world, and help us to be agents of peacemaking alongside your Spirit. Amen.

## Leader Helps

- Keep in mind your group members and group time as you choose activities for the session.
- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
- Begin the session by making a list as a class of places where people today live in war zones or under threat of violence. Invite the class to keep these places in mind as you are studying the lessons learned from the Yugoslav wars.
- Print or find a map of Europe to help visualize where each former Yugoslav republic is.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

## Teaching Alternatives

- Find out if any trainings in nonviolent direct action are taking place near you (see resource page under "Helpful Links"). Commit to attending a training together to learn about how to advocate for justice locally.
- Take a few minutes to research together where the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) or other Christian relief organizations are currently serving in former war zones or with refugees. Write notes of encouragement to aid workers serving as peacemakers to send to the organizations' headquarters.

## Closing Prayer

Jesus, our Prince of Peace, today we join our hearts with people around the world in longing for a peace that has not yet come on earth. Give us courage not to turn away from war, but to bear witness to your peacemaking love. Even as you gave yourself for the cause of reconciliation, show us where you're calling us to the sacrificial love of standing in the gap. Amen.