

INTRODUCTION

In October 2024 a conference took place in Prague with the title ‘Beyond Wars and Anathemas: Hermeneutics of Conflict Resolution in Different Theological Traditions’.¹ The aim of the conference was to see how different theological and indeed religious traditions presented ways to move beyond the language of necessary conflict and exclusion to search for resolution and hope. Writing this amidst ongoing conflict in the Middle East and the appalling claims to religious justification for it issued by certain self-styled ‘Christians’ in the USA, the need for this search for overcoming conflict is still all too relevant.

This issue of our journal contains articles based on four contributions to the conference. The first article from the conference turns to the late Pope Francis. Tim Noble, from the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University, looks at two of the pope’s four principles, that time is superior to space and that unity prevails over conflict, and shows how these relate to his condemnation of war as always a failure. It then goes on to look at the approach of Pope Francis to the war in Ukraine, noting that it was criticised by some in Ukraine, though also attempting to show that it is consistent with his overall thought.

The second article is one of two that deal with questions of ritual, pointing to the central importance of varying forms of ritual in

¹ The conference was organized by Professor Ivana Noble and her teams working on the projects Charles University Centre of Excellence: Theological Anthropology in Intercultural Perspective (No. UNCE/24/SSH/019) and the European Regional Development Fund project ‘Beyond Security: Role of Conflict in Resilience-Building’ (reg. no.: CZ.02.01.01/00/22_008/0004595). This editorial and the relevant articles are part of the work supported by these two projects.

understanding and working with situations of conflict. In her article, the Protestant liturgical theologian Tabita Landová looks at the role which such rituals, both secular and religious, can play in helping to come to terms with the emotional and psychological aspects of conflict and their healing.

The political philosopher Chantal Mouffe speaks of agonistics, of the struggles between conflicting hegemonies. If played out according to the same rules, then these struggles can occur peacefully, but when one side refuses to play by the rules, we have antagonism and conflict. In these circumstances, forms of resolution are required, and if they are to be successful, they have to be enacted, and this requires ritual expression. Landová's article looks at this, first in terms of secular and religious rituals, with the stress on religious ritual in the reparation of relationships between humans but also between humans and God. Ritual brings about transformation and this is seen in a short reflection on post-World War Two Czech – German relations, which sought to deal with the traumatic events associated in the first half of the century with the Sudeten regions of the country.

The third article is by a Syrian Protestant theologian Najib George Awab. It reflects on the ways in which Syrian refugees are forced to seek their identity in different settings, using a hermeneutical tripod of identity, relationality and othering. Seeking refuge is one obvious response to situations of conflict, and once again we are seeing that nations who refuse to accept those who seek refuge are among those most likely to cause the need for refuge in the first place. From a Christian theological point of view, refugees have long been regarded as almost archetypical for those to whom a special duty of care is commanded. They are the landless, the widows and orphans and strangers. Pope Francis, the subject of the first article, was merely continuing a long tradition in voicing his support for such people. Accompanying refugees in their search for a new or reinforced identity in new settings is a key task for churches today, even against the rhetoric of so many political parties across Europe and beyond.

In his contribution, the Hussite liturgical scholar Pavel Kolář returns to questions of ritual, in his case especially linked to events around the time of Covid. Here conflict is not in terms so much of violence or war, but in how we deal with challenges to human social life, the conflict in the case of Covid being between our needs for interaction and the demands of lockdown that made normal human socialization

often almost impossible. The article looks at the different ways in which societies in general and Christian communities in particular sought to invent or reinvent forms of social participation, even in the midst of isolation.

Whether or not Covid was the cause, it is clearly the case that social media have led to a widespread desocialisation of society, in which interaction with the other has been replaced by interaction with versions of the self (those who agree with me). This is what Emmanuel Levinas calls totality, the reduction of the other to the I, and as a result the sense of entitlement, that my world is the only one, and that everyone is obliged to agree with me. It is not surprising that this finds political expression in extremism and hatred, here in the Czech Republic as well as elsewhere. Public rituals are one way of rediscovering the other and a sense of community that moves beyond the same, beyond homogeneity to an embrace of difference.

It has to be acknowledged that if conflicts could be resolved by writing, the world would probably be a more peaceful place. And yet, it is the task of theologians both to reflect on what happens, pointing out strengths and weaknesses, and at the same time to dare to imagine another world, where conflict is not the first step and where peace and justice can flourish. This is possible and experienced in many of the small everyday encounters, where people negotiate shared spaces with humour and kindness and attention to the other. God is found at work in our world, and the task of theology is to speak of this God, against all attempts to tame him for people's own nefarious uses, in our theological faculties or elsewhere. The articles in this issue are a contribution to that task.

Tim Noble

DOI: 10.14712/23363398.2026.12