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Intolerance Is Just a Few Steps From Anarchy

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B Y C Y N T H I A T U C K E R *

INTOLERANCE IS JUST A FEW STEPS FROM ANARCHY

From the conflict in Kosovo, Americans can take lessons that have nothing to do with memories of Vietnam or the perils of playing “globocop.” There are simple lessons to be learned and relearned about holy wars, ethnic hatred, and the dangers of religious chauvinism in a diverse secular state.

As Americans who are Christians or Jews have gone about their celebrations of Easter or Passover, it's been easy to forget the political principles that make our (mostly) comfortable religious diversity possible. Kosovo serves as a haunting reminder: America has achieved what many nations have not—a cli-

mate in which people of different races and religions live together in peace.

That is no accident of fate. The Founding Fathers understood that religious conflicts had played a major role in generating wars since time began. They wanted to create a nation in which neither the state nor a powerful political majority could force a set of religious views on everybody else. Over time, those

* *Cynthia Tucker is the editorial page editor of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. This article appeared in the April 4, 1999 edition of the newspaper, and is reprinted with permission.*

ideals solidified into a culture in which most people respect religious diversity.

A very different culture has taken root in Yugoslavia. The hatred between the Serbs and the Kosovar Albanians has been nurtured for centuries, handed down from generation to generation in story and song, too bitter, too old, too deeply embodied to be simply explained. Still, there is a religious conflict at the root of this madness, which helps explain why ordinary Serbs still blast their Kosovar neighbors with the peculiar word *infidel*. ("Infidel" means, simply put, your religion is the wrong one; Christians used the word in the Middle Ages to disparage Muslims and, occasionally, Jews.)

If you've been following this saga, you know that the Serbs, overwhelmingly Orthodox Christians, hold a 600-year-old grudge over their "glorious" defeat at the hands of Muslim Turks in 1389 on the fields of Kosovo. Only in land where intolerance and suspicion and hatred of "the other" are nurtured—fed and watered daily—would that long-ago battle still stir passions and cause ordinary citizens to endorse a campaign of genocide.

Although the United States is still overwhelmingly Christian—about 85 percent of Americans identify themselves as adherents—it is rapidly becoming the most spiritually

diverse country in the world, according to religious experts who watch the trends. Islam is among the fastest-growing faiths.

In a nation that grows more diverse every day, the tradition of cultural and religious tolerance has to be carefully tended. Already there are signs of tension: In 1996, the last year for which figures are available, the FBI counted 1,400 hate crimes with religious overtones, a 53 percent increase in five years.

That means that all of us, whether we ascribe to a particular faith or not, have to stand up against the extremists who would promote public prayer in public schools, who would impose their religious views on the private lives of others, who would tear down the wall separating church and state. Not all of those misguided folk speak in a voice as threatening as that of anti-abortionist Randall Terry, who openly speaks of his goal of turning the United States into a "Christian nation." Some of the enemies of religious diversity seem much more reasonable as they speak of the need to expose school children to religious values. The problem is this: Whose religion will it be? Will the Muslim children be forced to bow their heads to a teacher-led Baptist prayer?

Down that road lies the kind of conflict that turned Kosovo into a killing ground. □