

# COLUMNISTS

## Racism can be conscious, unconscious

Recently news reports were filled with accounts of the massacre of 45 people near Racak, in the province of Kosovo, in southwest Serbia. This new episode of "ethnic violence" was apparently perpetrated by Serbs against Albanian civilians and guerrilla soldiers. The issue at stake is rooted in centuries-old rivalries and hatred between different ethnic peoples vying to control the same land.

I suppose I read these news accounts with a sense of dismay and confusion. I am not as aware as I probably should be about the rivalries and the history that drive this conflict in a distant, unfamiliar part of the world. I think I may even assume an attitude of "aloof superiority" sometimes, thinking that I and my country and my associates have evolved beyond the point of such "ethnic violence." And indeed there is nothing as obviously violent as this going on anywhere around me.

Still, my own life is not immune from a kind of "ethnic violence" that remains hidden in the contours of patterns that I have assumed over the course of my own history. Like everybody else, I was born into a certain social class in this country. Like everybody else, I lived in certain kinds of neighborhoods, went to certain kinds of schools, worshiped in particular



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

churches and made job and career choices that drew me to associations with certain kinds of people. For the most part, both the conscious choices I'm aware of making, and the unconscious ones I simply "fell into," have contributed to my living and working among people who are, for the most part, just like me.

I associate primarily with people of my same race. I associate primarily with people who have similar educational backgrounds to my own. The people I live near and work with have access to advantages that I enjoy, too. Their approach to "the systems" of U.S. culture are like mine. We have problems, all right, just like all other people in every other culture and place on earth. We face concern about those we care about, financial insecurities, health difficulties at times,

breakdowns in relationships, even weather-related setbacks.

But one of the greatest limitations characterizing my life, and I think the lives of many of us, has been my isolation from people who are not just like me. I am particularly aware of this limitation having just recently celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day. In spite of my familiarity with the life and writings of Dr. King, in spite of my admiration for the civil rights movement and all that it has meant for both the majority culture and minority cultures in our country, I must say that my own life has remained sadly locked into my own race, my own class, perspectives that are just like my own. Those around me are mostly white, so they enjoy the same use of cultural power and opportunity that I claim.

I have heard that prejudice against those who are not just like oneself is a universal phenomenon. We all fear those who are different, those whom we have not encountered yet. We all construct psychological barriers against others, and we weave imaginative theories about how "the other" is both inferior and threatening to ourselves. This is pretty much a universal phenomenon among all people; we need not be overly ashamed or enter into denial because we do this sort

of thing.

But racism is not just prejudicial attitudes toward those of other races. Racism includes the use of the power we have against people of other races. For most of us, the power we wield is exercised not through armies or direct political action, but is exercised in all kinds of subtle ways that keep us from recognizing it. We don't associate with people of other races. We don't become their friends. We don't worship with people of other classes. We don't hire people of other races. We don't live near people of other races. We aren't educated with people of another class. We secure our own advantage by making sure that "those most like me" can remain isolated and well apart from people of other races and other classes.

News from Kosovo, the celebration of Dr. King's life, some personal reflection on how we use our own power to keep other races "down and away" from ourselves need not afflict us with useless guilt and denial. We all need to personally address our own participation in racism, which I firmly believe to be the central evil of our time and culture. Not one of us is exempt from this.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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