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# Iran Exchange

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## Introduction

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One of the challenges for Christians is to relate to the other, the person or group that does not behave and believe as we do.

For me one of the most powerful encounters of this type was getting to know and working alongside Muslim colleagues in Palestine during our MCC terms there. Observing their obvious piety and commitment to constant prayer was a challenge to my own spirituality, and made it impossible to think of them as people without faith in God.

This is but an illustration of the kind of understanding and deep respect that can come from the student exchange program with Iran that Mennonite Central Committee has been engaged in for four years.

When two countries have been in conflict for decades, as Iran and the United States have, such exchanges can lead to greater understanding and make it more difficult for governments to demonize the enemy.

Peacemaking through student exchange? Find out how it works as you read these accounts by participants.

—Editor

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## MCC and Iran

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By Ed Martin

In June 1990, a terrible earthquake devastated many villages in Gilan and Zanjan provinces in the northwest of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This tragedy, resulting in the death of an estimated 30,000 people, was the starting point for Mennonite Central Committee's involvement with the people of Iran.

Despite having no prior experience or contacts in Iran, MCC wanted to respond to the disaster because of the magnitude of human suffering and to demonstrate our commitment to provide assistance to people in need "without racial, gender, religious, or political qualification." Given the poor state of relations between the governments of the

United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran, MCC considered it important to try to promote friendship and understanding between the people of Iran and North America.

### Responding to Disaster

In its initial response to the earthquake, MCC provided medical supplies to the Iranian Red Crescent Society (the Iranian equivalent of the Red Cross). MCC was also interested in long-term reconstruction following the earthquake. A four-person MCC delegation visited Iran in early January 1991, toured the area devastated by the

Sadreddin Sadr, then director general of international affairs for the Iranian Red Crescent, spent four months as international partner in residence in MCC's Washington Office in 1995.

In Washington, Mr. Sadr helped MCC staff and other church advocacy offices to better understand Iranian culture, religion, and politics. His warmth, compassion, good humor, and stories offered a human face in sharp contrast to local media images and U.S. State Department briefings on Iran.

Washington Office staff described to Mr. Sadr how MCC works at constituency education and political advocacy in ways that represent the concerns of MCC's partners in North America and abroad.

Sadr's time in the Washington Office came at a particularly tense time in U.S.-Iranian relations. During his visit, the United States announced new trade sanctions against Iran and committed funds to destabilize the government of Iran.

— Daryl Byler,  
MCC Washington Office

**Under the program, students from the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute are able to study in seminaries or universities in Canada and the U.S., and MCC can send students to study at the Institute in Qom.**

earthquake, and met with a number of officials of the Iranian Red Crescent Society and government agencies responsible for reconstruction. MCC decided to provide financial assistance to the Housing Foundation and Ministry of Health and Medical Education for the construction and equipping of fifteen village health clinics in the region affected by the earthquake.

After the Persian Gulf War of 1991, which resulted in more than a million Iraqi refugees entering Iran, MCC extended its work in Iran by contributing to the Iranian Red Crescent Society's refugee relief work. An American doctor and social worker were provided to work in one of the refugee camps for the summer of 1991. Food commodities, school kits, and blankets were shipped to Iran for the Iraqi refugees, and cash grants were provided to the Iranian Red Crescent Society to purchase food and other commodities in Iran.

In addition to the earthquake and refugee assistance, MCC has contributed to other disaster relief and social service programs of the Iranian Red Crescent Society. The relationship with the Iranian Red Crescent Society is very important to MCC.

MCC's relationship with the Iranian Red Crescent Society was greatly facilitated by Mr. Sadreddin Sadr, then director general for international affairs. Mr. Sadr had a vision for how the collaboration of MCC, a Christian humanitarian agency from Canada and the United States, and the Iranian Red Crescent Society, an essentially Muslim organization from Iran, could contribute to building bridges of friendship and understanding between the peoples of Iran and North America in addition to serving the needs of refugees and victims of disasters.

He was a great promoter of this cooperation within his organization and, I am sure, to the Iranian government. Without his vision, I am sure MCC's involvement in Iran would not have expanded the way that it has and may never have progressed beyond the first shipment of medical supplies.

MCC was very privileged to host Mr. Sadr as an international partner in residence in the MCC Washington office for five months in 1995. His interactions with the MCC staff and reporting to the MCC executive committee were extremely informative, and his compassion and the faith basis for his humanitarian work were evident.

While developing the relationship with the Iranian Red Crescent Society and following up on the village health clinic project with the Housing Foundation, I was able to visit Iran at least once a year, see much of the work of the Society and the Housing Foundation, and meet a number of Iranians, both officials and private citizens. Often, one or two other MCC staff traveled with me.

## **Developing an Exchange Program**

From the beginning of its involvement in Iran, MCC wanted to promote more interaction between North American Mennonites and Iranians by finding ways in which MCC personnel could live in Iran and Iranians could be hosted by Mennonites in Canada and the U.S. One way that seemed to offer this possibility was a student exchange program, similar to MCC's experience with Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Under this program, MCC sent students to study in universities in cities such as Warsaw, Belgrade, Prague, and East Berlin. This enabled North American Mennonites to make friends with people living in Communist countries that were not easily accessible to people of Canada and the U.S.

In exploring the possibility of a student exchange with an institute or university in Iran, I was encouraged to make contact with Iran's permanent mission to the United Nations in New York. One of the staff, Dr. Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour (currently director general of the Institute for Political and International Studies in Tehran), was interested in the proposal, as was then Ambassador Dr. Kamal Kharrazzi (currently the Iranian minister of foreign affairs).

Dr. Sajjadpour and Dr. Kharrazzi's support for the proposal was essential to its successful development. They took the proposal to Iran, and the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute (IKERI) in Qom, Iran, responded favorably to the proposal.

In April 1997, MCC executive director Ron Mathies and I went to Qom to negotiate with IKERI the arrangement for a student exchange program. Under the program, students from the Institute are able to study in seminaries or universities in Canada and the U.S., and MCC can send students to study at the Institute in Qom. MCC pays the living and education costs of the Iranian students studying in North America, and the Institute pays the same costs for the North American students studying in Qom.

This agreement was completed one month before Mohammad Khatami was elected president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Soon after the election, President Khatami proposed a Dialogue Among Civilizations and suggested the exchange of scholars, artists, and athletes between Iran and the United States.

The first MCC-sponsored students, Roy and Maren Tyedmars Hange, went to Qom in early 1998 (see the article by the Hanges, below). They studied Farsi and Islam, and Roy participated in a class on Christianity taught at the Institute.

In the fall of 1998, Yousef Daneshvar, along with his wife and two children, came to Toronto as the first Iranian student under the exchange program (see the article by Mr. Daneshvar, p. 10). He is studying philosophy of religion at Regis College of the Toronto School of Theology. A second student, Muhammad Farimani, accompanied by his wife and son, arrived in Toronto in the spring of 1999. Mr. Farimani is also studying philosophy of religion at Regis College.

Evelyn and Wallace Shellenberger have very recently received their student visas to enter Iran to study in Qom. In addition to their study at the Institute, Evelyn hopes to be able to do some volunteer work with an Iranian social service agency that works with women and children.

## Breaking Down Barriers

This exchange program allows Mennonites from Canada and the United States to live among the people of Iran and to study something that is very important to Iranians— Islam, their religion. The Iranians are able to study Christian theology and Western philosophy while living among Mennonites in Toronto. In the dialogue, North American Mennonites are also able to communicate their understanding of Christianity to their Iranian friends, and the Iranian Muslims can explain their understanding of Islam to their North American friends.

By living together and studying each other's religions, North American Mennonites and Iranian Muslims are able to better understand and respect each other and to become friends. It is our hope that this dialogue will contribute to better understanding between the peoples of Iran and of North America.

I personally feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to visit Iran a number of times over the past ten years and to make many Iranian friends. The development of MCC's relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran is something that came as a complete surprise to me, and I am richly blessed to have been part of this unique program. It is my hope that, with God's leading, it will continue to develop.

*Ed Martin is director of Central and South Asia programs for MCC.*

**By living together and studying each other's religions, North American Mennonites and Iranian Muslims are able to better understand and respect each other and to become friends.**

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## Dislocated for Service

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**By Maren Tyedmars Hange and Roy Hange**

**W**hat does the Lord require of us? How often do we ask ourselves this question? We express it in different ways: we wonder about our calling, the meaning of life, our next steps, where we are headed, how we go about our work and our lives, and how we relate to the people around us. We have many choices to make to be faithful in our lives and many of those choices we don't even think about until we are forced into ever new situations.

What does the Lord require of us when we go somewhere where we are strangers, or when we have strangers come into our community? How do we love the stranger? How do we learn from and teach strangers? How do we welcome others or receive hospitality? Where do we find community to

nurture and sustain us? On our journey of faith and service we cannot assume anything but God's faithfulness.

### Abraham and Sarah

Throughout the Old and New Testament we find God's people moving around into new communities, wandering the land from one place to another like Abraham and Sarah, Jacob with his families, Moses and the people.

Jesus and the disciples went from one place to another teaching and healing people, the apostle Paul traveled to start and sustain new churches and communities. They were on the journey of faith and founded ways of God's faithfulness.

**How do we love the stranger? How do we learn from and teach strangers?**

continued on page 4

**Much of MCC's work is wandering in strange lands to see what is good to do and how it is good to be with the simple trust that God will be in the midst of our work.**

Abraham was seventy-five years old when he left Haran, his friends, relatives, the familiar places. He went to Canaan, on to Bethel and the Negev, all the way down to Egypt and back up again to Hebron. Abraham did this because God said, Go. He might have stayed in each place long enough to make new friends, to start feeling at home. Maybe he said to God at some point, Hey, I am getting tired of this. I don't want to move one more time, get used to one more custom or one more culture, pack my bags again, get on my camel once again.

Or maybe he trusted in God and simply followed God's order and everything fell in place for him. Our daughter Karina thinks wherever her parents are is home, and she takes it for normal that we move to a new place every couple months. She has not lived in one place for more than four months in the last two years. She has a simple trust that we will take care of her.

Much of MCC's work is wandering in strange lands to see what is good to do and how it is good to be with the simple trust that God will be in the midst of our work.

### **Arriving in Iran**

Several years ago we went with MCC to Iran, to the city of Qom, the center of Islamic study, where Ayatollah Khomeini had studied, and where today students from all over the world prepare themselves to become religious leaders of their Muslim communities and to prepare for the Islamic revolution—a faith-based movement to change the political face of the world.

We were invited by a faith community as part of an exchange program, but this time it was a Muslim community, unlike the Christian community we lived with in Damascus. There were and are no Christians living in Qom. We were the first and only ones. The closest Christian community was two and a half hours away in Tehran. What did the Lord require of us in such a situation? How were we to walk in the ways of the Lord when we were alone? Where were we to find ourselves in the presence of the Lord?

There were no structures in place to walk in God's ways as we knew them, no church nearby that invited us to worship, no group welcoming us to their Bible study, or for fellowship. Where were we to look for the

presence of the Lord: when we didn't feel it in familiar ways; in a place where people wondered how to relate to you since you were considered ritually unclean; where you constantly saw war and martyrdom, even of young teens, idealized on TV; where I had to hide myself in a black chador; and where the five-year-old son of a classmate of mine one day came home from day care, which our daughter also attended, marching around the living room chanting "Death to America!" which he learned at the daycare. There I could cry out with the psalmist in Psalm 69:1-3:

Save me, O God,  
for the waters have come up to my neck.  
I sink in deep mire,  
where there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters,  
and the flood sweeps over me.  
I am weary with my crying;  
my throat is parched.  
My eyes grow dim  
with waiting for my God.

But there was also light. There were many people who invited us into their lives, who shared a meal with us in their home, who helped us when we didn't know our way around. These were people who saw themselves as descendants of Abraham and Hagar and extended their generous hospitality to us.

### **Stories of Encounter**

There was Heideh, who in the beginning of our time in Qom took me around the market to show me the best places to go shopping for food and other things. And as we were buying some vegetables, another woman approached us and started talking. I figured she was begging but couldn't understand what she said. What happened was that the woman didn't have enough money to buy food for lunch, and she asked my friend Heideh to buy a cauliflower for her, which she did because of the friendliness of the woman begging.

There was the Iraqi refugee family, our neighbors in the first place we lived in. On one of the first days, when we had barely any food in the house because we were still learning where to go shopping, their eighteen-year-old daughter Mariam knocked on our door and brought us a bowl of soup for lunch. This was our first real meal in our home.

**Their eighteen-year-old daughter Mariam knocked on our door and brought us a bowl of soup for lunch. This was our first real meal in our home.**

Then there was the Yazdani family with their six children. They were an example in hospitality and whenever we had a problem we could count on Mr. Yazdani. One time when we had to take Karina to the hospital in the middle of the night, he was there to translate and insisted on staying with us for a few hours until she was released.

There were many times when the encounter between our faiths provided new insights. We both studied the Qur'an and Islamics but we also taught.

Roy taught *The Politics of Jesus* by John Howard Yoder to a group of Muslim professors who teach Christianity at several seminaries in Qom, which led to many fascinating discussions about who Jesus was and what the role of faith is in the world today.

Later Maren began teaching the daughter of one of the professors at the institute where Roy was studying. We studied the history of the church, beginning with the Acts of the Apostles. Fatima will one day become a professor of Christianity and this was a chance for her to learn from a Christian rather than from books only.

Through a faithful allocation of finances and personnel, MCC has chosen to dislocate itself and its constituency positively toward its supposed religious and political enemy Iran, and is now seeing the fruits.

From our perpetual dislocations the last years and our reflections on MCC's role in dislocating its constituency over the years through overseas service, we have come to see more clearly that the journeys of faith in all of the Scriptures began in dislocation:

the banishment from Eden

the destruction of the earth by flood

Abraham's sojourn through the land

sojourn to and slavery in Egypt

the exodus and wandering in the wilderness  
numerous exiles in strange lands

the ethnic cleansings reported in the books  
of Maccabees

the alienation from the land by Greek and  
Roman occupation

In light of all this we can see that for Jesus  
the cross was the ultimate dislocation:

from God—in Jesus' sense of being forsaken  
even as a revelation of God's love

from community—in Christ's alienation,  
which became our inclusion

from hope—in the cross's apparent defeat,  
which became the hope of the world

from justice—in the cross's injustice where  
God's merciful justice was revealed

from Jesus' family—yet where the family of  
God was truly begun

from peace—yet where the War of the Lamb  
was begun

The cross as the ultimate dislocation of God  
is then the grace

that separates us from our sin

relocates us in God's love and reign

and empowers us to give and live  
in service

And it is so with the dislocations in our  
lives:

the death of loved ones

moving to serve in new lands

exile

birth

life changes

early terminations

war

becoming refugees

These dislocations are times when almost  
everything ends and everything can  
begin again.

These are times when God seems most  
distant,

yet when we can be born again  
into the arms of God.

For our dislocations are a reminder of our  
mortality:

a reminder that it is our spirits alone that  
matter the most

our dislocations become the greater Lenten  
seasons of our lives

when all is stripped away and we are told by  
life's circumstances the very words of the  
ritual of Ash Wednesday when the ashes  
are put on the forehead:

"You are dust and to dust you will  
return."

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**Through a faithful allocation of finances and personnel, MCC has chosen to dislocate itself and its constituency positively toward its supposed religious and political enemy Iran, and is now seeing the fruits.**

**The cross as the ultimate dislocation of God is then the grace that separates us from our sin, relocates us in God's love and reign, and empowers us to give and live in service.**

**For as we are held—so we should then hold the world as we in MCC serve the world “In the Name of Christ.”**

We all then know that who we are is how we are held in the arms of God, how we are held in the grace of the cross, for the cross for Jesus was both profoundly personal and political.

For as we are held—so we should then hold the world as we in MCC serve the world “In the Name of Christ.”

We do so dislocated from our personal and national interests

and are then freed up to see the world as it is,

to walk freely and peaceably in the midst of its supposed divisions,

and to meet needs as we are able.

One more story is necessary here from our time in Syria:

When Konrad Raiser, head of the World Council of Churches, visited Damascus the Grand Mufti hosted a meal at the Orient Club. Through MCC’s connections to the Middle East Council of Churches, Maren and I were invited.

We happened to be seated at a table with the local head of the U.N. Development Program, the Grand Mufti’s main English translator, and a Muslim convert friend of his from the United States. As the conversation moved to MCC’s work and the Muslim friend of the Grand Mufti’s translator told the story of when he had been with MCC workers after World War 2 taking horses to Europe by ship.

In the midst of two hours of linen, crystal, and the smell of fine food, when this American Muslim remembered two weeks on a ship with the smell of hundreds of horses, he turned to the Grand Mufti’s translator and said: “There should be more Mennonites in the world.”

He did so reflecting on the spirit of service he saw there in lives dislocated from their own concerns toward the needs of others.

These acts from fifty years ago are still echoing through history and hearts.

And in telling this story we now charge you as a committee to write the music of mercy that will echo through the next millennium.

By leading and calling us into being a community that finds God’s freedom in dislocation:

to walk the razor’s edge of the world’s conflicts calling for a peaceable way

to send workers into the middle zones of development and relief work

to speak seeing our words as hammer blows on the swords of contention

May your hope for the world in this new millennium be as fierce and gentle as God’s love and mercy made known in one crucified on a cross.

May your work be blessed by the whimsical joy of the Spirit’s doing a new thing through you.

And may your labors here be under the light yoke of the Incarnate One who is yet pulling the world toward wholeness.

Amen.

*Roy Hange and Maren Tyedmars Hange are copastors of Charlottesville (Va.) Mennonite Church. Roy formerly served with MCC in Egypt, Syria, and Iran, and Maren in Syria and Iran. This article is adapted from a devotional at an MCC executive committee meeting.*

**May your work be blessed by the whimsical joy of the Spirit’s doing a new thing through you.**

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# The Exchange Program Seen from Iran

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By Muhammad Legenhausen

When Ed Martin sent an e-mail requesting an article on the Iranian perspective toward the student exchange program agreed to by Mennonite Central Committee and the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute (IKERI), I thought that the best way to comply would be with an interview of Ayatullah Misbah, the founder and director of IKERI. The interview took place on March 18, 2001, and what follows is a transcription made from an audio-cassette recording.

LEGENHAUSEN: In the Name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate. With all due respect, I would like to ask you a few questions regarding the student exchange program we have had for the past several years with MCC. The first question I would like to ask is: What motivates our Institute's participation in this program?

AYATULLAH MISBAH: In the Name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds, and salutations and blessings to Muhammad and his pure household. On the basis of what we have learned from Islam, God Almighty created man to know His way to felicity, the way to nearness to God, and of one's own free choice to follow that way, and as a consequence, to be blessed with divine favor and mercy. This goal is not exclusive for any particular individual, group, or race.

Just as Muslims are obligated to have faith in the Prophet of Islam, and to revere him, we are also obligated to have this faith in all the prophets, and to confirm and revere all of them. As stated in the Qur'an: "We make no difference between any of His Apostles" (Sura 2:285). The Prophet himself (may the peace and blessings of God be with him and his progeny) and the Imams (peace be with all of them) invited the scholars of the other religions of the world to enter into dialogue, and they tried to emphasize and draw attention to the common positive points stressed by all the prophets, and on the basis of one kind of belief to build unity.

Also, the exchange of different points of view can help refine our ideas and keep the legacy of the prophets from pollution. So, by cooperation with each other we may combat our common enemies, which are disbelief and idolatry.

Today, we face common enemies that threaten the two great divine religions of Islam and Christianity, and so we sense a redoubled responsibility to come closer together and to exchange ideas so that we may combat these common enemies. This necessitates that we have more information about each other's thinking, that we have honest friendly relations, and that we become informed of the message of the prophets that is in their hands, and that they should be informed of the message of the prophets that is with us, especially that of the Prophet of Islam. Then we can make more progress toward our common goals.

One of the best ways to achieve this is to send our students to the non-Muslim countries, especially to attend universities managed by Christians themselves, devoted to the promotion of their own religion and the exposition of their creed, so that they can learn about the Christian religion from the Christians themselves. Parallel to this is that when Christians are within an Islamic country to hear about Islam from Muslims, it is less likely that foreign distorting factors or those with malicious intentions to distort the teachings of Islam will influence them.

LEGENHAUSEN: How do you respond to critics of the program?

AYATULLAH MISBAH: I have not come across anyone who has objected to this program. If we always look at others with suspicion and antagonism, we can never get around to listening to one another. It is not the case that the people on this earth must be essentially enemies. If antagonism is found, it is either from the devil, and this is only so in a minority of cases, or it is from ignorance, as in most cases it is because of a lack of information. In order to combat both of these we all have to be seekers of the truth, and since we have no evil intentions, it is necessary for us to come closer and set up lines of communication and relations.

So, on the one hand, in order to convey our good points to others, relations are necessary. Secondly, the prophets have conveyed a portion of the divine teachings to the followers of other religions. Muslims are obliged to have faith in all the prophets. There is no guarantee that others have not preserved the heritage of the prophets, aside from what has reached us in the Qur'an and the narrations

**Just as Muslims are obligated to have faith in the Prophet of Islam, and to revere him, we are also obligated to have this faith in all the prophets, and to confirm and revere all of them.**

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## At Home in Qom

Evelyn and Wallace Shellenberger have recently moved to the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, Iran, where they will be studying language and Islam and volunteering at a local social service agency.

They will be continuing the Iran-based portion of the Iran exchange program that was begun by Ed Martin and continued onsite by Roy and Maren Hange.

“Living in Qom will provide the Shellenbergers with opportunities to dialogue with professors and students and to make friends with the Iranian people,” said Martin.

**We can have reasonable and considerable relations with the Christian world. Indeed, we consider such relations obligatory.**

from the household of the Prophet. It is quite possible that there are many truths that have reached others from their own prophets.

LEGENHAUSEN: How important is this program for Muslim-Christian relations generally, and, more specifically, for Mennonite-Shi'ite relations?

AYATULLAH MISBAH: There are two serious dangers that threaten humanity: one is the danger of faithlessness with regard to God Almighty, and the other is the corruption of morals. Those who are most capable of facing up to these dangers are the two great divine religions of Islam and Christianity. So, we can have reasonable and considerable relations with the Christian world. Indeed, we consider such relations obligatory.

In our dealings with the followers of the Messiah, either accidentally or by divine fate, we have become acquainted with these Mennonites in America, and we find more that the marks of truthfulness and truth-seeking are among those of them whom we have encountered, that is, the good intentions of those whom we have met are palpable. This is not meant to deny the good intentions of others.

But, in any case, those of them with whom we have had dealings are dear people in whom we have found their good intentions and truthfulness shown in word and deed. This made us like to have better relations with them, and we took the steps to welcome them here, enter into a student exchange program with them, and send students from here and host those introduced to us by them, and we are prepared to continue in this work.

LEGENHAUSEN: I wanted to ask whom you consider to be the common enemies of the Muslims and Christians, and how can our cooperation help us in our efforts against these enemies?

AYATULLAH MISBAH: Both historical evidence and rational analysis, and also the explanations found in the Qur'an—all agree and prove that over the course of human history, the prophets have always faced groups of those who were hostile to them and who were not interested in finding the truth. Today, unfortunately, despite the progress

that has been made in science and civilization, we face very ugly examples of this sort of person. The world wars that have taken place during the twentieth century, the Cold War, and other activities that are sometimes even worse—people whose only aims in life are material pleasure and power over others undertake these sorts of things.

Unfortunately, today, most of the power of the world is in the hands of such people. In every major country, there is a minority that controls the country's wealth, the media, and the culture of the country. In a word, they are those who weaken faith in God and who defile moral values. These are our common enemies.

Fortunately, among the teachings of the divine religions, especially Islam and Christianity, we have a rich treasury of elements with which to combat such enemies. In our relations together, it would be good for us to highlight these elements and in cooperation with one another to strengthen each other in their use so that we may dam the wave of corruption that threatens faith on the one side and morality on the other.

Therefore, we are optimistic that, if we carry out our own responsibilities, and recognize those who are really searching for truth, and try to cooperate with them honestly, then day by day we will come closer to the realization of the divine aims of felicity and that the enmity and hostility of the world will be transformed into brotherhood and friendship, and people of good will who seek the truth will be victorious over the devil, and the ground will be prepared for world peace.

This is something foreseen in all the great religions, and it is especially emphasized in Islam that this day will come. It is interesting that in our narrations it is stated that this day will be the day on which Christ descends again from heaven to earth, and in cooperation with our twelfth Imam, they will be together. This gives us even greater hope in cooperation with our Christian brothers. I hope that we can take effective steps down this road together and each contribute in this way to world peace, God willing.

*Dr. Muhammad Legenhausen is on the staff of the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, Iran.*



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# MCC Exchange Program Brings Iranian Muslims to Toronto to Study Theology

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By Carol Penner

**Y**ousef Daneshvar and Muhammad Farimani bring a different perspective to their doctoral studies at the Toronto School of Theology. They are Islamic students from Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, Iran, who are participating in an exchange program sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee. Together with their wives and children, they moved to Canada in 1998 and 1999. Going to classes, talking with other students, and visiting with Mennonites, Daneshvar and Farimani have been learning about Christianity, as well as teaching others about Islam.

“This exchange has given me an opportunity to have very exciting work,” explained Daneshvar. He outlined why he decided to come on the exchange: “At first what was important to me was to have some academic studies at a Western university—to know more about the West and Christianity. But as time passed and we got more involved in the exchange, another goal became more important to me—having a dialogue, an active dialogue with Christians.”

“This is a good program for me,” Farimani added. “For a person who has studied Islamic studies, it’s important to have knowledge of Christianity and Western culture in the world we are living with now. . . . We can become familiar both with Western culture and Western perspectives about Islam.”

MCC began this exchange program with the Qom institute in 1998. It is part of MCC’s desire to consciously increase its understanding of Muslim people and countries. Islamic culture is often viewed with suspicion by North Americans, typified by the way Western media often portrays Muslims as terrorists. Some Islamic leaders see the secular and materialistic West as “the enemy.” The exchange program is one way of trying to build bridges of understanding and reconciliation between Christians and Muslims.

Former MCC workers Roy and Maren Hange participated in the Iranian side of the exchange, studying for 10 months in Qom, before the illness of their child required their return to North America. MCC has recently placed Wallace and Evelyn Shellenberger as students in Qom to replace the Hanges.

Ed Martin, Central and Southern Asia program director for MCC, has traveled to Qom a number of times to forge relationships. Dr. Abolhasan Haghani and Dr. Muhammad Legenhausen of the Qom Institute have also visited MCC in the United States.

Participation at the Toronto School of Theology has exposed Farimani and Daneshvar to people from a wide range of Christian denominations. The students acknowledged that they had held some stereotypes about the West when they came to Canada. In some ways these stereotypes were confirmed, particularly in terms of the openness regarding sexuality and relationships between men and women.

However, Daneshvar also noted, “My relationship with other students has helped me to distinguish between the West as secular culture and Christianity as a religion that seeks to preserve piety and morality.”

One important relationship is with Susan Kennel Harrison, who has served as a local coordinator for the two students and their families. Both Farimani and Daneshvar have been careful to shield their children from negative influences in North American culture. However, Daneshvar has been surprised to see Christians doing the same thing: “Sometimes I have found Susan being as strict as me about her children watching TV!”

Harrison helped with the logistics of getting the two families settled in apartments in Toronto. Daneshvar’s wife, Masoumeh, has been taking English classes, and has been able to connect with Iranians in the student housing apartments where they live. Their son Mojtava, fourteen, and daughter Maryam, eleven, both attend public school. Their children have worked successfully to adapt to the English language. “My daughter sounds like a native English speaker—she speaks without an accent!”

Farimani’s wife, Atieh, studies English at home. The people in their apartment building have not been friendly, but she has made connections with Mennonites and with people at the mosque where they go to worship. They have a son Morteza who is three years old.

**Another goal became more important to me—having a dialogue, an active dialogue with Christians.**

**For a person who has studied Islamic studies, it’s important to have knowledge of Christianity and Western culture in the world we are living with now.**

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**The Mennonite tradition has a high value on charity and a simple lifestyle. These are two things that are strongly recommended in Islam.**

Harrison has helped make connections with Mennonite congregations in the area. “We’ve gone to four different Mennonite churches and had good discussions,” Farimani noted, “and we would like to visit more!”

Daneshvar and Farimani have also attended an InterVarsity Graduate Student Fellowship, as well as monthly gatherings of Mennonite graduate students.

The exchange program has resulted in many fruitful inter-religious discussions. Being faithful Muslims, Daneshvar and Farimani are clear on how Islam differs from Christianity. Farimani explained that the Qur’an rejects the concept of the incarnation and the trinity as corruptions of Jesus’ original teaching. At the same time, “Jesus is greatly respected in Islam, he is one of the five greatest prophets along with Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Muhammad.”

Farimani went on to suggest some commonalities that he has noticed between Islam and Mennonites: “The Mennonite tradition has a high value on charity and a simple lifestyle. These are two things that are strongly recommended in Islam.”

Prior to this exchange, neither Daneshvar or Farimani had heard the word Mennonite. Now they are forging friendships with people from another culture and religion.

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## An Intellectual Journey

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By Yousef Daneshvar

**Through these studies I had come to see it as a necessity for Muslim scholars to procure a profound knowledge of the West.**

It was on a winter day of 1997 that I was called to a meeting with the chief director of the Imam Khomeini Institute, Ayatollah Mesbah. The meeting with the director was short, but it was going to have a far-reaching impact on my life and on the life of my family.

It was proposed that I pursue my studies at a university in North America as part of a student exchange program between the Institute and Mennonite Central Committee, a name that had never reached my ears until that day.

My wife and I had never considered making such an overwhelmingly huge change in our life. Being away from our homeland and all relatives for a long time, living in a country with a culture totally different from our own, and above all, the extensive exposure of our children to Western secular culture, just to mention a few reasons, made me hesitant to give an affirmative answer to this call.

However, there was at least one encouraging aspect to this long and risky journey. My studies in Iran were, to a large extent, motivated and shaped by problems that mostly originated in the interaction and confrontation between religion and modern thought in the West. Through these studies I had come to see it as a necessity for Muslim scholars to procure a profound knowledge of the West, in its different aspects, and of Christianity, as all those problems had their root in the interaction of these two in the modern era.

For me the meticulous investigation of this history-making interaction was the prerequisite of any informed treatment of the complicated philosophical and theological problems hailed from it. Now, I was provided with an opportunity to take my part in fulfilling this necessity by studying in a Western, Christian academic environment. This aspect of the trip seemed advantageous and significant enough to make me decide to go on this journey. Nevertheless, had I not enjoyed my wife’s support and encouragement I would never have made such a bold decision.

## Studying the West in the West

I arrived in Toronto with my family on September 18, 1998. Upon passing English language courses and exam, I started my studies as a Ph.D. student in philosophy of religion at Toronto School of Theology.

Our children go to both Canadian and Iranian schools, which is not so easy for them. My wife spends most of her time at home. This is quite a challenge for her since she was a university student in clinical psychology in Iran and had to quit her studies to move to Canada.

As a matter of fact, our life here has been full of challenges, even though a kind of adaptation has been achieved by the constant and very generous support of our hosts, particularly Susan Harrison, the local coordinator of the exchange program here in Toronto.

I have been enjoying my studies here. Let it be mentioned here that, as far as my studies go, my debt to Professor George P. Schner S.J., a man of both great scholarship and high moral virtues, is fundamental. He supervised my studies until his unexpected demise in November 2000 and was of great help to me to have a good start in my academic career here. His death was quite a loss for me.

Soon after I arrived in Toronto, I got involved in a constructive and instructive dialogue with Christians. First my dialogue partners were only Mennonites, but after a while it was extended to Christians of a wide range of denominations. This added a new dimension and impetus to my work. Later on, this part of my work became very important to me, since I realized what a great impact it could have on our life in this world.

In one sense, even my studies started to serve as part of this dialogue. Involvement in this continuous exchange of ideas, together with living in a highly multicultural society, has provided me with a great opportunity to know our world, humankind, the different ways human beings see the world, and the various outcomes of their quest for truth. On this side of the earth, I have been able to take another look at it and its problems, and to think of some new solutions to them.

Of course, as my field of studies suggests, religion versus secularism has always been part of my meditations. I am fascinated to see how these two approaches diverge and converge on various issues and how religions

## Give Us This Day . . .

I invite you to Qom, Iran, where my daughter and I would often buy a certain kind of fresh bread from a bakery. It was about as tall as my young daughter when it came out of the oven. It was called *sanjeck*. This bread was made on a huge pile of stones heated in the oven. The dough was placed on top and you could watch it growing in the oven.

There was one unique thing about this bread. Many of the breads in the Middle East came fresh, which usually meant standing in line, or they came in plastic bags and could be bought quickly. But I never saw *sanjeck* bread in a plastic bag; you had to eat it that day. It had that quality of freshness.

My question for MCC is: When we talk about giving this day, in the immediacy of the moment, in the encounter of relationship, what does that mean? Is it worth waiting so long for such a good thing as that fresh bread?

Ed Martin, MCC director for Central and South Asia, stood in line, literally, for that kind of fresh bread. He visited Iran for many years before we went there. When we finally were able to go to Qom, we saw the fruits of his labors. We entered into the trust he had established and attempted to deepen that trust.

In fall 1998 I met daily with the foremost professor of Christianity in Iran. He was a Muslim who taught Christianity to the Muslim seminarians. He had been studying and teaching Christianity for thirty years. We read together and discussed *The Politics of Jesus* by John Howard Yoder, which talked about how Jesus' ministry was more than just spiritual, having many other implications in his own time. He was fascinated by this book and we daily had discussions. During those times our words were ground down into a new understanding of the interface of Christianity and Islam.

Although we agreed to disagree on many points, I believe we both saw Jesus in a newer and clearer way in that time. That time became for us a kind of *kairos*, a holy time, a gracious transformation of the prejudices we had about one another's religion.

And so I believe it happens in many other kinds of encounter in MCC. The kind of development, relief, and peace work we do cannot be done by persons just doing a job. It is the power of daily presence: give us this day that daily presence in transformational development work that requires relationships over time. It is there that we enter into more than functional relationships.

I saw many of those functional relationships in Syria. Where business people would come simply to invest and make a profit, where tourists would come to gawk and look, where ambassadors and embassy people would come simply to represent their countries' interests. We and a few others were there to serve, to be, to give, to relate and to know the people who were there . . . this day, each day. Ours was a different kind of relationship day in and day out.

William Willimon of Duke University has noted that Jesus rarely took predetermined initiatives in his own ministry. He had a sense of the will of God moving with him but most often responded to situations he encountered with a kind of dynamic, creative graciousness always angled toward bringing as much life as possible. Through that image we can carry a vision for MCC's work.

—Roy Hange

among themselves, despite their significant commonalities, see the world and its problems differently due to their different views of the universe, God, and man.

To mention just one of many examples, I came to understand how the Christian pacifists' exclusive emphasis on peace vis-à-vis the ongoing bitter conflicts on the earth is deeply anchored in their doctrines of God, sin, and forgiveness, whereas the Islamic perspectives on the same subjects lead to giving priority to justice, while peace is highly respected as long as justice receives due respect in peaceful circumstances.

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The *Peace Office Newsletter* is published quarterly by the Mennonite Central Committee Overseas Peace Office. Editor is Mark Siemens. Consulting Editors are Bob Herr and Judy Zimmerman Herr. Opinions expressed in this newsletter reflect those of the authors and not necessarily those of Mennonite Central Committee.

Additional subscriptions welcome—see address below. To keep paper and energy waste at a minimum we ask you to inform us if an address should be changed or if a name should be dropped from our mailing list. Telephone: (717) 859-1151. Printed in the U.S.A.

To subscribe to *Peace Office Newsletter*, please send your address to MCC, PO Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500 or e-mail Bev Martin at <bjm@mcc.org>. Direct requests for additional copies of the newsletter to Esther O'Hara at <geo@mcc.org>. A donation of \$10.00 per year per subscription is suggested. Peace Office welcomes contributions to its work.

## A Mutual, Informed Understanding

It goes without saying that neither the Christian nor the Muslim side in this exciting dialogue has convinced or even has tried to convince the other of its views. A mutual, informed understanding of each other, however, has obviously developed between us.

I could go on for hours talking about my experience of living in Toronto and being engaged in a fruitful dialogue with Christians. But let me conclude with the statement that now I believe more strongly than I did at any time before that humanity today desperately needs the help of religions to overcome the ever-growing predicaments on the globe. I can hardly imagine that religions can provide this help without conducting a serious and friendly dialogue between themselves.

I think Muslims and Christians for a variety of reasons have to take more responsibility in this regard than the followers of other faiths. I know that Christians have their own scriptural and theological reasons, in addition to the practical ones, to greet the interreligious dialogue. Muslims, I believe, are stimulated to make this event happen by the Holy Qur'an. The first voice to call me to this dialogue was the Holy Qur'an that enjoined Muslims more than 1400 years ago:

Dispute not with the people of the book save by what is the best, except for those of them that do wrong; and say we believe in what has been sent down to us, and what has been sent down to you; our God and your God is one, and to him we have surrendered (Sura 29:46).

*Yousef Daneshvar is one of two Iranian participants in the MCC-sponsored student exchange program.*

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