



Christians and Muslims Reflecting Together

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Building Bridges: The Shia of Iran and Mennonites of North America

by Ed Martin

Although it was only in 2004 that the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) adopted interfaith bridge building as a key initiative in its five-year plan, this has been a primary focus of the MCC program in Iran since its beginning in 1990. MCC's work in disaster relief and a student exchange program has been motivated by a desire to build bridges of understanding and friendship between Iranian Muslims and North American Mennonites. The absence of diplomatic relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States has contributed to MCC Bi-national's desire to promote good relations between the peoples of Iran and the USA and Canada. At the same time, the presence of diplomatic relations between Canada and Iran has made it easier for MCC to sponsor exchanges.

MCC's program in Iran began after the massive earthquake in June 1990 which resulted in more than 35,000 deaths in Gilan and Zanzan provinces. Before the earthquake, MCC had no program or experience in Iran. While the primary purpose of MCC's response to the earthquake was to contribute to the relief and reconstruction needed following the disaster, equally as important was a desire to demonstrate our concern for the people of Iran, a country labeled "enemy" by the United States government. The overthrow of the Shah who was an ally of the United States, the subsequent emergence of an Islamic government, and the taking and holding hostage of U.S. embassy personnel in Tehran in 1979 all contributed to the Islamic Republic of

Iran being considered an enemy by the United States.

The government of Iran has also considered the United States a threat to its independence and an intruding enemy. A democratically elected Iranian government was overthrown by a coup supported by the CIA in 1953, and the Shah's government was put in place with strong support by the United States. "Death to America" is a common slogan at government-sponsored demonstrations in Iran.

From 1991 on, MCC developed a strong partnership with the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS). With the encouragement of the IRCS, MCC funded the construction of 15 Health Houses (village health clinics) in the area affected by the earthquake. Following the 1991 Persian Gulf war, MCC provided food, material resources, and short-term medical personnel to the IRCS to assist in caring for the more than one million refugees who fled from Iraq into Iran. To this day, this unique partnership continues, with MCC and the IRCS collaborating in relief efforts following earthquakes, floods, and droughts in Iran.

During and following the United States-led war in Afghanistan to oust the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, the IRCS operated two camps for internally displaced people and provided other assistance to the people of Afghanistan. MCC supported these efforts through the provision of blankets, food commodities, and personnel. MCC also contributed to the IRCS's efforts of relief and

On a crowded bus stop in Qom, an Iranian woman and I were engaged with her question, "why would a United States Christian choose to live in Iran? Doesn't the United States consider Iran its enemy? Soon the bus pulled up but I could not step on, it was packed. My new Iranian friend stepped up, addressed the women on the bus saying, "this is our guest from the United States, would you please make room for her." Quickly six women stepped down, offering me their place. It was then I knew why I was living in Iran. It was to help make the mutual discovery that stereotypes are shattered when we, together, live as human beings in the God-intended way.

—Evie Shellenberger

Evie Shellenberger and her husband, Wally, were students in Qom, Iran, as part of an MCC exchange program from mid-2001 to January 2004.

reconstruction following the severe Bam earthquake of December 2003.

This partnership has resulted in many conversations in which Iranian Muslim staff of the IRCS and Christian MCC personnel discuss the faith basis of their humanitarian efforts. This shared "diaconia" or humanitarian service has opened up opportunities for interfaith dialogue, and this has been an important dimension of the partnership between MCC and the IRCS.

Exchange

In 1998, a more formal interfaith dialogue began through an unusual student exchange program that was initiated by MCC between the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute (IKERI) in Qom, Iran, and the Toronto Mennonite Theological Center (TMTC), a part of the Toronto School of Theology (TST) in Canada. Under the program, two Iranian students and their families are sponsored to live in Toronto while the students study for a Ph.D. in philosophy of religion. And two North American students selected by MCC study Islam and the Persian language and literature at IKERI in Qom. This exchange program has allowed North American Mennonites to live among Muslim Iranians in Qom and to study Islam, the religion of the majority of Iranians. Iranian graduates of the Institute and of the traditional Shia seminaries in Qom study Western philosophy and Christian theology in TST while living among Canadian Mennonites.

This exchange program has provided numerous opportunities for formal and informal interfaith dialogue. Classroom discussions involving Muslims and Christians are one example of formal dialogue. In addition, the Iranian students in Toronto have been invited to a number of Mennonite churches and schools to speak about Islam and to dialogue with students and church members. While they initially felt a bit uneasy about going to visit churches, the two students in Toronto recently said they would be happy to go to a church every Sunday. They understand the importance of the dialogue dimension of the exchange.

The Mennonite students in Iran have been invited to several universities to speak to students and faculty about Christianity. They have always been received with the greatest respect and have been asked many questions.

Two formal interfaith dialogue conferences have been held under the auspices of the exchange. The first, hosted by Toronto Mennonite Theological Center (TMTC), took place in September 2002 in Toronto on the topic of "A Shia Muslim and Mennonite Christian Response to Modernity." A second conference was hosted by IKERI in Qom in February 2004 on the topic "Revelation and Authority." These conferences allowed for formal presentation and discussion of scholarly papers as well as a great deal of informal interfaith dialogue over tea and around the dinner table. A third conference, to again be hosted by TMTC, is scheduled for June 2006 on the topic "Reason and Spirituality."

Ten North American Mennonites participated in a two-week learning tour in Iran organized by IKERI in October 2003. They visited a number of famous cities in Iran and had many opportunities to interact with the Iranian people. The planning for a second learning tour is underway.

In both Qom and Toronto, the exchange students also engage in many private conversations concerning various issues related to their faith. Both Iranian Muslims and North American Mennonites are learning about an important sister religion and gaining a new respect for and acceptance of the "other."

The Shia from Iran and the Mennonites from North America enter into this exchange and the interfaith bridge-building with a clear sense of who they are as Muslims and Christians. They also believe that by engaging in interfaith dialogue they can sharpen their own faith and expand their understanding of God, while at the same time increase their understanding of "the other" and build new friendships. The MCC Iran program is an exciting example of building bridges in an interfaith context.

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Christians and Muslims Seeking Peace

by Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen

The fundamental call for peace over many centuries in both the Christian and Muslim worlds has been a call for unity to fight against a common enemy. Historians have suggested that the very idea of Europe as a cultural and political entity is grounded in the perceived need to unite against the common Muslim foe. Muslims have also sought to mollify sectarian strife by calling attention to the need to unite against the attacks of Christians. There are numerous other examples in which people come together and define their own identities through their opposition to a common enemy. In 1952, the term *third world* was coined by economist Alfred Sauvy in an article in the French magazine *L'Observateur*. The meaning changed from Sauvy's analogy with the *tiers état*, as it was taken up enthusiastically during the Cold War to describe countries that were neither members of NATO or the Warsaw Pact. So, NATO came to define the West, the First World, against the communist menace and the "underdeveloped" rest over whose resources the Western and Eastern blocs competed. In all of this, we find that the inspiration to seek peace and alliance is coupled with opposition to a presumably hostile other.

What motivates peace, in such circumstances, is inseparable from what motivates enmity toward the other, because it is the perceived need to confront the enemy with a common front that makes local peace among opposing factions possible. Peace is sought as a means of procuring security from an external enemy. This implies that loss of the external enemy might be felt as a threat to internal security. Without the fear of the hostile *other*, factional fighting among those allied against it might break out.

In his *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) Tomaž Mastnak has documented the historical development of the European peace movement through the centuries of the crusades. Crusades were not seen as a form of war, but as a sacred blood sacrifice. Those who sought peace in Europe were exclusively opposed to the spilling of Christian blood by Christians. Although mysticism in all the world's religions is usually associated with love of all creatures and

non-violence, there have been notable exceptions. Mastnak ends his book with a discussion of St. Catherine of Siena.

In the 1370s Catherine promoted the return of the Pope to Rome from Avignon, peace among Christians, and a revival of the crusades to culminate in the Church's victorious march to Jerusalem. She viewed the crusade as a mystery of blood: "Just as Christ had shed his blood for the salvation of men, so Christians now had to shed their blood for Christ to free his patrimony from impious hands." (Mastnak, 341) She described the crusade as a wedding feast. When Pope Gregory XI held an audience with Catherine, he explained to her that he wanted to make peace among the Christians so that he could then call them to a crusade. Catherine responded that there was no better way to make peace among Christians than by ordering a crusade. She believed that the result of the crusade would be the conversion of the Muslims, whom she described as "wicked unbelieving dogs".

Mastnak continues: "The greatest minds of the Medieval Western world . . . as well as mystics and visionaries, all bent their heads and their knees before the spirit of the crusade. They all subscribed—rarely with silence, often with admirable eloquence—to the declaration that it was necessary to eliminate those who had been named infidels and declared enemies. This made the greatest minds at one with the mindless. . . ." (Mastnak, 345–346) The profound understanding of the Middle Ages with all its subtlety and mystical insight was unable to imagine that there could be anything wrong with the most rapacious campaigns against the infidels.

Enmity or Love

The idea that enmity is what legitimizes the state as a political institution was rigorously defended by the Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985). Schmitt argues that there is no political identity without enemies and the potential for war with them.¹ At the same time, Schmitt seeks to blunt religious opposition to war by interpreting the phrase, "Love your enemies,"² as referring only to personal enemies (Latin, *inimicus*) and not national enemies (Latin, *hostis*). He writes

Human beings are members
of one another,
who are all created from one
jewel.
When pain comes in one member's
life
others cannot remain at peace.
If you are not disturbed by another's
suffering
how can you be called a human
being.

—Sa'di, a 13th century Persian
poet.

approvingly: “Never in the thousand-year struggle between Christians and Moslems did it occur to a Christian to surrender rather than defend Europe out of love toward the Saracens or Turks.” (Schmitt, 29). There has been a revival of interest in Schmitt's thought among American neo-conservatives because of his critique of liberalism. In works such as his *Politische Theologie*, Schmitt drew upon Catholic traditionalists to argue that the individualism and pluralism inherent in liberalism debilitate the state.³

Today, simultaneous with the atrocities committed by Muslims and Christians against one another and too often blasphemously justified by appeal to religious loyalties, unprecedented steps are also being taken to promote understanding and dialogue. I am proud to have some small part in the facilitation of these steps, as a result of which there are on-going projects for cooperation and communication between Mennonites and Shi'ites in Toronto and Qom, and between Catholics and Shi'ites in England, Austria, the United States, and Iran. The most visible signs of dialogue are conferences that have been held and are being planned. However, no one should imagine that the point of dialogue is to have conferences! The conferences help us to focus attention on one another, to explain ourselves to others, to seek common elements in faith, feelings and practice, and to attempt to expand upon them. Some of the seminary students in Qom, for example, who observed the last Mennonite-Shi'ite symposium there, have expressed an interest in devoting their careers to the deepening of such mutual understanding.

As Muslims, we take part in dialogue because it is a religious obligation. We are called upon to follow the example of the Apostle of God, Muhammad (s) and the Imams (‘a) in seeking “a common word” between ourselves and “People of the Book”. We hope and pray that through the friendships that we have found in dialogue,

we may prepare the ground for further friendship and mutual understanding, and that with the expansion of this work we may help to move closer toward the lofty ideals of peace and justice. Through dialogue we hope to equip ourselves with the understanding necessary to effectively change attitudes among others with whom we engage when such attitudes result from misperceptions, bias, and unfamiliarity.

Some may judge the attempt to be folly. A follower of Carl Schmitt might say that the promotion of such sympathy with the enemy (for he defines enemies as those with whom our nation is potentially at war) can only weaken the state and make its citizens vulnerable to those who have no inclination toward mutual understanding at all. In diametric opposition to this line of thought, we offer ideals of cosmopolitanism that can be found in both Western and Islamic traditions. According to these ways of looking at citizenship, we are to see ourselves as belonging to a polis that includes the entire world. The enemy we face is not defined by territory, religion, race, or ideology, but by strife and oppression themselves. If it is inevitable that we must define our own identities in opposition to an enemy, then let us heed the Qur'an when in it we are told that Satan is indeed our manifest enemy. Let us attempt, through dialogue and understanding, to find a place for one another in the Kingdom of God.

Notes

1 See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

2 Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27).

3 See A. James Reimer, *Paul Tillich: Theologian of Nature, Culture and Politics* (München: Lit Verlag, 2004), 25–28.

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A Life of Dialogue

by Mahnaz Heydarpoor

The Messenger believes in that which has been revealed unto him from his Lord and (so do) the believers. Each one believes in God and His angels and His scriptures and His messengers—“We make no distinction between any of His messengers”—and they say: “We hear, and we obey. (Grant us) Your forgiveness, our Lord. Unto You is the journeying”. (The Qur’an, 2:285)

This verse like many other verses of the Qur’an puts great emphasis on the uniformity of the prophets, their scriptures, and their missions. It makes one think that one belongs to a great community of faith including all believers throughout the history of mankind who have followed the same path.

Indeed, the idea of uniformity of all religions is a very profound aspect of the Muslim conception of monotheism. Islam like other Abrahamic faiths believes in the unity of God. God is the only Creator and He is the only object of worship. The obvious result of this conception of God is that the universe must be harmonious and consistent. This harmony and consistency in the divine creation extends to His revelations. Divine messages communicated to the people through His messengers are to be harmonious too.

Thus, Muslims believe in conformity of all divine revelations and prophecies. They confirm and believe in all the Prophets and consider all believers in God members of the same community of faith:

Say: “We believe in God and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes and in (Books) given to Moses, Jesus and the Prophets from their Lord; we make no distinction between one and another among them and to God do we bow our will (in Islam)”. (3:83)

Unity of God manifests in unity of His revelations and must be echoed in unity of all believers in God. Islam brought unity and solidarity for those who suffered a great deal from enmity and hostility (3:103). This act of unifying people is highly esteemed as a divine act (8:63). On the contrary, the action of people such as Pharaoh was to disunite people (28:4). The Qur’an warns believers that if they start disputing with each other they will weaken and they will, therefore, be defeated (8:46).

It should be noted that the call for unity is not limited to Muslims. The Qur’an invites all people of faith such as Christians and Jews to unify their efforts and concentrate on their common ground (3:64). One of the best means of achieving this unity and brotherhood is to know each other, to overcome historical prejudices that prevent objective understanding between each other, and to build upon commonalities. According to what Imam Ali, the first Imam of the Shi’a Muslims and the fourth Caliph of all Muslims has said, “People are enemies of what they do not know”.

It was in this spirit that since our first visit to U.K. in 1996, my husband and I (also a graduate of the Islamic Seminaries of Qom), always look for friends among people of other faiths in addition to our relations with our Muslim brothers and sisters. In particular, we wanted to find some practicing Christians who could represent Christianity and at the same time be open to us. Such people could help us to understand directly this great faith, discover our commonalities, and exchange our experiences in facing the challenges of living a life of faith today.

Living out love

At that time I decided to write my M.A. dissertation on “Love in Christianity and Islam”. In this way, I could learn more about the similarities between these two great religions. During the research period, I not only read about my topic—love—but I also tried to live my topic and to witness it in the lives of others. In July 1999, I spent an entire week with some Christian friends at *Mariopolis* in Windermere and noticed many similarities between Islam and Christianity and that how a sincere love for God and fellow humans can give a new spirit to life and a new life to modern society. At that time I was reminded of my own experience when I was just 16. I was so overwhelmed by my thirst and love for God that I no longer could follow the ordinary life. I decided to join the Seminary of Qom and dedicate my life to learning in depth about my faith and, above all, to experience the genuine love of God. Now I was able to find some people who also believed in and followed the same way, the path of love. Since then I have done my best to develop my understanding of Christianity as it started and as it is practiced today. Not only did I make lots of personal

The call for unity is not limited to Muslims. The Qur’an invites all people of faith to concentrate on their common ground.

Dialogue Means Friendship

Advocates of dialogue often focus on conferences, books, articles, committees, etc. But in my experience, the most profound moments of dialogue have been unplanned and come out of the friendships that are formed naturally while living among Muslims.

In a most ordinary flow of events, our neighbor invited us for dinner one night last year, and while there I met one of his friends, Sayyid Ata Anzali, who in turn invited us for dinner at his house the following week. We were quick to become friends, sharing interests in theology, the study of other religions, and goals of academic careers.

Ata is a Sayyid. This means he is a descendent of Muhammad, the final prophet of Islam. Each week we meet together. We read the Bible together, we read the Qur’an together, and we have great conversations. The moments are rich, and they give me hope for the future of dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

—Matthew Pierce

Matthew Pierce and his wife, Laurie, are students in Qom, Iran, as part of an MCC exchange program.

friends, but also I visited many Christian organizations and places of worship and education in U.K. and Italy.

The result of what my husband and I started some years ago is that we have noticed many similarities between Islam and Christianity, and that a sincere love for God and fellow humans can give a new spirit to life and a new life to modern society. There are sincere, truth-seeking, and humble Christians who have devoted their lives to God. These people should be taken as the real representatives of Christianity, instead of those who call for separation, enmity and fighting between believers and are far from practicing the commandment of love. Unfortunately, today there are people who are called “Muslims” or “Christians” or “Jews” but by no means do they accurately represent their faith.

Currently I teach world religions at Jami'at al-Zahra, the largest Islamic university for women, in Qom, Iran. In my teaching I try to convey to my students my experiences of friendship between us Muslims and Christians. I have also published *Love in Chris-*

tianity & Islam which was welcomed by both Muslims and Christians. This book was published by New City (2002 & 2005), a Christian publisher in U.K. and Ireland, and has also been translated into Spanish and Malay. From time to time I also attend interfaith conferences. For example, in July 2003 and 2005, I attended the first and second Shi'a-Catholic engagements in London and Ampleforth, York. The first meeting was considered by the *Tablet* as the “first major British encounter of Catholic theologians with Iranian Shi'a thinkers and theologians”. A book based on the conference—*Catholics and Shi'a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology and Spirituality*—was published in 2004 in London.

Let us hope and pray that soon we will be able to witness the unity of God echoed in the unity of mankind and that all the wounds of hostility and injustice will be healed by the return of global society to God.

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Mysticism and Dialogue among Cultures

by Mohammad Fanaei Eshkevari

There is no one single agreed-upon definition of mysticism. Each tradition and school of thought defines mysticism in a specific way. However, we can find important common elements in the thought of all those who speak of mysticism. Sometimes mysticism in its wider sense is used as a synonym for spirituality. Mysticism in its all forms goes beyond the ordinary sensory appearance of the world. It assumes an inner and hidden realm of reality that is larger, wider and more real than the apparent world. The same thing is true for human beings. Mystics try to surpass human appearances, going beyond them to the depth of human reality and seeing dimensions, needs, activities and ideals beyond their counterparts in material everyday life.

Mysticism looks at the world and human beings in a way different from that of normal outlooks (whether they be ordinary, scientific or philosophical), and requires tendencies, behaviors and a way of life that in certain ways is different from ordinary

alternatives. Mystics try to bring harmony between the inner aspect of human beings and the inner aspect of the world.

Unifying vision, esoteric tendency, seeking spiritual perfection, love, hope, contentment, tranquility, self-knowledge, optimism, striving for liberation from the slavery of desires, self purification, prayer and contemplation are among the most common elements in most if not all of the mystical traditions.

Mysticism can be divided into two very broad categories: theistic and non-theistic. In theistic mysticism, to which this article refers, the real and original being (the Truth/*al haqq*) is God. There is no other independent being. If anything else exists, it must be a manifestation of Him. Any human perfection is due to proximity and connection with God, referred to by some mystics as annihilation into or unity with Him. This can be attained through contemplation, love and purification of heart.

The tendency towards mysticism is a trans-cultural and trans-religious phenomenon. It is part and parcel of all civilizations, traditions and religions. The effects of mysticism can be seen in various dimensions of human life, such as culture, literature, art, and architecture. Its tremendous effect can also be seen in some individual lives. This kind of spiritual feeling is a general phenomenon. Thus, one may say that the tendency toward a kind of mysticism/spirituality is a genuine and natural impulse in human beings.

A deeper form of this feeling, which appears in specific individuals in specific situations, is called mystical experience. Though mystical experience does not happen to every individual, the experience is a widely recognized phenomenon occurring in all cultures and civilizations with more or less similar characteristics. William James mentions four common distinguishing features of mysticism: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity.¹

The object of this experience, i.e., the reality that is experienced, is more or less similarly described in various mystical traditions, being called such things as unity, life, infinity, knowledge, greatness, eternity, immateriality, and being beyond human understanding.

In theistic religions, particularly the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), both mystical knowledge/feeling and its object are clearly defined. Mystical knowledge is a kind of inner, immediate and intuitive awareness different from ordinary sensory and intellectual knowledge. The object of this awareness is God and truths related to God. The feeling of dependence to God is imprinted in human nature (*fitrah*). Knowledge of the deeper layers of the truth and the experience of this reality comes about through the grace of God and the purification of heart only to rare and fortunate individuals.

Despite the common elements of mysticism in the various traditions, the differences between these traditions are also undeniable. For instance, there are real differences between Islamic mysticism and Christian mysticism. The difference between the mysticism of the Abrahamic traditions and Indian mystical traditions is much deeper.

Commonalities among Mystical Traditions

However, the commonalities between the various mystical traditions are overwhelming. One may say that the essence

of mysticism is one essence that is manifest everywhere in a variety of ways. It is one face reflected in various mirrors. It is one rain whose water takes different shapes in different containers.² One and the same experience may be expressed and interpreted in different ways due to differences in culture, religion and mindset. Sometimes these differences are like the disagreements of the group of people who touched an elephant in a dark room and reported it differently.³ Or they are like the quarrels of a group of people over buying the grape that came about due to their ignorance of each other's languages.⁴ They say different things, but they want the same thing. Some of their differences are superficial, but their commonality is substantial. Of course, it does not mean that all expressions and interpretations are the same and equally accurate. What is important for us in the issue of dialogue are the profound communalities between the various traditions. At the very least, no mystical tradition encourages animosity, hatred, violence, separation, selfishness, injustice, cruelty and aggression.

We know that one of the greatest tragedies in human life is the suffering inflicted on human beings by human beings. Unfortunately, animosity, cruelty, injustice, aggression, war, occupation, murder, torture, rape, and plunder, etc., are everyday facts of life. No natural disaster such as an earthquake, flood, typhoon, wild animal attack, etc., causes more destruction to humanity than humanity itself. In conflicts those who have more power are victorious. Their logic is that might is right. Ironically it is said that human beings are the only animals blessed with reason, but at times this reason is used to rationalize atrocity.

The motives behind these actions are selfishness, self-interest, and achieving more power, wealth or pleasure. Sometimes the root of the problem is ignorance. Differences in beliefs and values do not themselves lead to conflict, but in the soil of ignorance and moral corruption they can be major sources of problems.

Divine prophets through religious teaching about the presence of God, religious laws and regulations, strengthening faith and moral virtues, have tried to educate people and reduce the amount of corruption and conflict. There have also been wise people in different societies who have tried to bring solutions to these problems. They have employed different devices such as ethical principles, law, and social order to control the violators of human rights. Each of these

Resources for further reading

Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*. New York: Pantheon, 1985.

Mohammad Khatami. *Islam, Liberty and Development*. Binghamton, NY: Binghamton University, Institute of Global Cultural Studies, 1998.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Sufi Essays*. Chicago: KAZI Publications, 1999.

Wright, Robin. *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.

Christopher de Bellaigue, *In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs. A Memoir of Iran*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.

What I am emphasizing is dialogue based on the common human tradition of mystical feeling and awareness.

attempts has had its effect on improving the human situation and reducing its suffering.

However, even among civilized people there is always some difficulty in peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding. Dialogue is a way to exchange ideas, promote mutual understanding, solve disputes, and bring closeness of heart and unity, as well as work together to achieve common goals. Dialogue can have different bases, such as common interest, common culture, language, ethnicity, or religion, each of which can help to achieve the goal in a limited way.

What I am emphasizing here is dialogue based on the common human tradition of mystical feeling and awareness. Rarely do individuals lack spiritual feeling, and rarely does a culture or civilization lack a mystical tradition. It seems that spiritual feeling is one of the most fundamental and solid foundations for brotherhood, mutual understanding and unity. From this point of view, the root of understanding and friendship is not in material interests or conventions and contracts, but rather in the deepest layer of the heart and the very essence and reality of humanity. This deep common tendency and experience, love and enthusiasm for one reality and eagerness to connect to it, and feeling of having the same origin and destiny, will cut animosities and conflicts off at the root and strengthen friendship, brotherhood and love.¹ Mysticism is a solid ground for attaining human ideals in a variety of ways.

Conflict

Conflicts are rooted in selfishness, and mysticism is against any kind of self-centeredness. The essence of the mystical life is love, which means forgetting the ego and melting into the other. If all people realize that they have the same origin, the same beloved, and the same ideal, and that they are traveling toward the same destination, they will not feel separation and strangeness, let alone animosity.

Conflicts arise out of following selfish desires, whereas all mystical traditions insist on resisting selfish tendencies and being liberated from slavery to them. If both sides in any conflict refrain from following their selfish desires, many conflicts will be solved or dissolved.

Conflict results from setting up differences—multiplicity. It occurs between me and he or she, us and them. Mysticism denies this kind of multiplicity and duality, and provides a unitary vision. This vision makes us one and

connects us to one and the same source and origin. It fills all gaps. Conflict comes from ignorance, prejudice, intolerance, and impatience, whereas the fruit of mysticism is insight, tolerance, and patience.⁵ And finally, conflict only takes place in the absence of truth, beauty and the good, while mystical life is nothing but a search for the truth, beauty and the good.

The project of dialogue on the basis of a common human mystical heritage suggests that we all begin from our common mystical spiritual insights and discover our common spiritual heritage, after which we will realize that all our genuine motivations, needs, values and ideals are the same. We have similar feelings and experiences, similar concerns and attachments, even though we express them differently. We have the same journey and the same destiny, we all reject slavery to desires, we all love God and worship Him, we know that love of God is not separate from the love of neighbor⁶, and we all follow the same fundamental moral principles. On the basis of these commonalities and similarities we should draw close to each other,⁷ talk sincerely and in friendship, exchange our insights and experiences, try to solve our problems, correct our misunderstandings, help one another live better lives and walk the path toward salvation and happiness.⁸ The essence of this dialogue is a mutual call toward God, the source of all being and existence, values and beauties, in a wise and compassionate way.⁹

Undoubtedly, this kind of dialogue brings us closer together, strengthens our common feelings and experiences, and makes us more united. Then we will see the blessings of the All Merciful and the manifestation of His light in our lives.

Through such dialogue we can begin to understand and improve our common experience and begin to see the manifestations of this common tradition in various realms of life—in our thought, morality, science, art, media, economy and politics—as we discover how to bring the essence of spirituality into all dimensions of life.¹⁰

Notes

I should thank Laurie and Matthew Pierce for their kindly editorial help and references to the Bible.

1. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1907), N.Y.: Penguin Book, 1982, pp. 380–381.

2. “He sends down out of heaven water, and the wadis flow in its measure” (The Holy Qur’an, XIII: 17).

3. As seeing it with the eye was impossible, (each one) was feeling it in the dark with the palm of his hand.

The hand of one fell on its trunk: he said, "This creature is like a water-pipe."

The hand of another touched its ear: to him it appeared to be like a fan.

Since another handled its leg, he said, "I found the elephant's shape to be like a pillar."

Another laid his hand on its back: he said, "Truly, this elephant was like a throne."

(Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, Book Three, translated by R. A. Nicholson).

4. Again Rumi describes:

"A certain man gave a dirham to four persons: one of them (a Persian) said, "I will spend this on angur ."

The second one was an Arab: he said, "No, I want 'inab, not angur, O rascal!"

The third was a Turk: and he said, "This (money) is mine: I don't want 'inab, I want uzum."

The fourth, a Greek, said, "Stop this talk: I want istafil."

These people began fighting in contention with one another, because they were unaware of the hidden meaning of the names. In their folly they smote each other with their fists: they were full of ignorance and empty of knowledge.

If a master of the esoteric had been there, a revered and many-linguaged man, he would have pacified them;

And then he would have said, "With this one dirham I will give all of you what ye wish" (*The Mathnawi*, Book Two).

5. The Bible states that the fruit of God's Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control (The Holy Bible, Galatians 5:22-23).

6. Jesus said: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (The Holy Bible, Matthew 22:37-40).

7. The Holy Qur'an says: "Say people of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that serve no one but God. . . ." (III: 64).

8. We should "encourage one another and build up one another . . . live in peace with one another. . . . encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone" (The Holy Bible, I Thessalonians 5:11-14).

9. Imam 'Ali in a letter to Malik Ashtar, who was appointed as the governor of Egypt, tells him to treat people kindly, and "do not stand over them like greedy beasts who feel it is enough to devour them, since they are of two kinds, either your brother in religion or one like you in creation" (Imam 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib, *Nahjul Balaaghah*. Maryland: Ahlul-Bayt Assembly, 1996, Letter 53, p.239.)

10. "Call thou to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and good admonition . . ." (The Holy Qur'an, XVI: 125).

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Mennonite-Christian and Shi'ite-Muslim Dialogue: An Experiment in Mutual Understanding

by A. James Reimer

My own involvement in inter-faith dialogue began with considerable resistance on my part. My own field is Christian theology, and although I believed theology must include an empathetic engagement with all Christians, all faiths, and all peoples, I did not have a serious interest in entering new arenas of scholarly pursuit. This has changed in recent years as I have encountered Shi'ite Muslims from Iran. This exchange has changed the way I do theology. What I thought was the periphery has changed to the center.

Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (TMTC), a research and teaching center at the Toronto School of Theology (TST), University of Toronto, has been deeply

enmeshed in a MCC-sponsored exchange program between North American Mennonites and the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute (IKERI) in Qom, Iran. Two doctoral students from IKERI, Mohammad Farimani and Yousef Daneshvar and their families, have been living in Canada for about seven years now. Mohammad and Yousef have spent many years studying Islamic law, philosophy and theology, and are nearing completion of their doctoral programs at TST in the field of philosophy of religion. I am Yousef's thesis supervisor and on Mohammad's doctoral committee. I have come to know both of them well, and have travelled, particularly with Yousef, to Mennonite churches in Ontario for speaking engagements.

There is within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition an appreciation for the importance of rational knowledge as an occasion of faith, reflected in how we view adult baptism and the Lord's supper.

**IN THE NAME OF GOD,
THE COMPASSIONATE,
THE MERCIFUL**

**Challenges Encountered
by the Monotheistic
Religions**

All divine prophets had one mission, namely, to introduce humanity to God, His Will, and His Values.

In the modern age, however, the triads of power, wealth, and sensualism have converged to promote a secular worldview, and it has dominated a great part of human society. It has brought with it moral standards compatible with that worldview, standards such as self-interestedness, greed, oppression, corruption, and violence, against which nothing but faith in God can be effective.

Secular ideology dictates a systematically pagan order to the world that legitimizes the abuse of advanced technology to usurp the world, and to monopolize power and wealth at the expense of the misery and deprivation of a majority of people. An atheistic system takes advantage of the media to manipulate public opinion and propagate its secular worldview, provides destructive entertainment to dehumanize its opponents, and uses weapons of mass destruction and nuclear and chemical weaponry to terrorize them. Unfortunately, such forces have, to some extent, succeeded in achieving their goals, and we witness the negative effects of their efforts all around the globe, thanks to the internal quarreling and confrontations in the religious camp.

We believe that it is a must to unite with other truth-seekers in the world. We have to come together with other faiths and cultures who believe in divine values, so that we may set up a comprehensive program for guiding humanity out of this miserable condition. It is unfortunate that the followers of divine religions are scattered and have even become each other's opponents. This is the result of their reciprocal misunderstanding and

(continued on page 11)

Emerging out of this exchange program has been a series of academic dialogues between Mennonite and Iranian scholars. These conversations have taken place in two conferences with a third one now planned. The first occurred in Toronto in October, 2002, hosted by TMTC, on the theme of the Challenges of Modernity for each of our traditions (see TMTC Newsletter, Vol. 11, No. 1 [Summer, 2003]); and *The Conrad Grebel Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3 [Fall 2003]). What first surprised me was how eagerly these Muslim intellectuals wanted to understand western, Christian philosophical and theological thought, and how intensely they struggled with the issues of modernity facing the Islamic community. The second dialogue took place in Qom, Iran in February, 2004, hosted by the Imam Khomeini Institute, on the theme "Revelation and Authority." (See *TMTC Newsletter*, Vol. 12, No. 1 [October, 2004]). What impressed me was how both traditions are strongly people of the book—i.e., Mennonites take the Biblical text as authoritative as do the Muslims the Qur'anic text. There are some differences, which I will refer to below.

The third such dialogue is planned to begin in late May, 2006, on the theme of "Spirituality and Reason," to explore the commonalities and divergences in our understandings of spirituality and piety, as well as the role of reason in its relation to religious experience.

The purpose of these dialogues is to promote mutual understanding and mutual conversion. I don't here mean conversion of Muslims to Christianity or Anabaptism, nor Christians to the Islamic faith (not that that may not be a legitimate agenda in other contexts). But, rather, through a mutual encounter, to convert one another to a deeper understanding and commitment to one's own faith, to aspects of one's tradition that have perhaps been overlooked.

I give here just one example on each side. On a trip back from Leamington, Ontario, Yousef asked me the following question: "You Mennonites are such good and pious people, but why do I never see you pray?" I could have given him the usual, mundane answers to this question: "we don't pray openly and publicly like you do; we pray quietly and unceasingly." But at that moment I realized a fundamental truth. As Mennonites we have concentrated so intently on living upright moral and ethical lives that we have frequently undervalued the spiritual roots of all righteous living. I began taking more seriously my own personal life of contemplative and liturgical

prayer. A Muslim had reminded me ("converted me") to something in my own tradition that I had either lost or forgotten. On the other side, our Muslim friends have so often heard Mennonites emphasize the importance of non-violence, peace and reconciliation that, I believe, they have come to reread the Qur'an with a new eye to its message of peace.

Differences and Similarities

This openness to each other's tradition can be firmly founded only if it is justified on grounds intrinsic to one's own religious beliefs and texts. I have been astounded at how generously the Qur'an can be interpreted with respect to other religions. And, I have been struck anew at the embrative and inclusive attitude of Biblical texts toward all other peoples. What follows are some observations about the rationale for dialogue, and the differences and similarities in approaches.

First, we are engaged in a common search for *truth* that lies beyond either tradition. Both Christianity and Islam are monotheistic and universalistic religions; that is, they both affirm a belief in one divine agent, the one universal truth that underlies and grounds all of reality, visible and invisible. Both recognize the fallibility of all human understanding. This recognition and the constant yearning to know more fully the complete truth is a rationale for dialogue.

Second, Islam has a strong sense of the absolute *transcendence* of God, and a profound fear of any idolatry. This is why Mohammad the prophet is not considered divine; he is but an ordinary human being who became a vehicle for divine revelation. Here we as Christians, particularly Mennonites, who take so seriously the teachings of the human Jesus have something to learn. Western thought since the time of the Enlightenment, including theology, has lost the sense of transcendence. The human Jesus has often been deified, without a recognition that the fight of the early Christians against heresies was precisely an attempt to maintain the transcendent mystery of the one God over against various forms of reductionism. While they believed in the deity of Christ, they were careful to formulate this deity in such a way as not to make blasphemous claims about the human Jesus as such. It was Jesus as the Christ that was God. Here we see a fundamental difference between Islam and Christianity, but we could well stand to be reminded of the radical transcendence of the divine.

Third, there is *ethics*. Here perhaps Mennonite Christians have the greatest affinity with the Shi'ites. We have as a common trait a *strong moral-ethical consciousness*. This takes on somewhat different forms in each faith, but, there is mutual recognition of the importance of holding belief and morality, spirituality and ethics together. The reason why such an exceptional bond of mutual respect has developed between the two sets of scholars is that both consider the intellectual endeavour inseparable from righteous living and a concern for global humanity.

Fourth, both value the importance of *reason* in the life of faith. This claim may be surprising to some Mennonites; surely, we have not emphasized the role of the intellect, philosophy and speculative thought to nearly the degree that Muslims have. While this is true, there is within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition an appreciation for the importance of rational knowledge as an occasion of faith, reflected in how we view adult baptism and the Lord's supper. Only when young adults have reached the age of rational accountability can they make a knowledgeable decision of faith and join the church. What has been lacking is serious reflection on the relation of reason to faith and spirituality. (One of my doctoral students has written a thesis precisely on the relation of the Anabaptists to Medieval natural law/human rationality).

Fifth, for both traditions the *sacred text* is authoritative and viewed as revelatory. It is true that there are substantive and methodological differences in how Muslims and Christians interpret their respective texts. Muslims manage to achieve a much greater consensus on the fundamental meanings of the Qur'anic text than do Christians in their interpretation of the Bible. Rather than applying the western tools of historical-criticism to the Qur'an, Muslims "let the text stand" as God's literal, revealed Word, and then find a rich variety of mystical and spiritual levels of meaning in it. For Christians, the ultimate revelation of God is personal - the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus the Christ. The Bible is revelatory in its attesting to this incarnation. For Muslims the text itself is the explicit, direct revelation of Allah.

Sixth, Muslims and Mennonite Christians share a common hope in the coming of the *Kingdom of God on earth*. The twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, who Muslims believe never died but disappeared mysteriously and is hidden at the moment, will reappear together with Jesus to set up an eternal kingdom of justice on earth. This kingdom is a penultimate reality. After this comes the final judgment, heaven and hell.

Jesus is highly revered among Muslims. In fact, the Muslim scholar Professor Towfiqi, who has memorized all four Gospels of the New Testament, referred on a number of occasions in our dialogue to Jesus as "our Lord Jesus Christ." He did not thereby imply that Jesus was God but rather a great prophet who should be revered. Where Mennonites and the Muslims disagree is how to achieve this kingdom of God on earth. Unlike Mennonites, most of whom have historically been suspicious of the role of the state in bringing about such a kingdom, Muslims hold that it is precisely through an earthly government that the conditions may be prepared for the coming of the twelfth Imam. For many Mennonites it is rather within the small, counter-cultural believing community (sometimes referred to as the "Messianic Community") that the kingdom of God is anticipated.

This brings us, seventh, to a further comparison, an anthropological one. Mennonites have historically waffled on the question of *original sin*, parting company with mainline Protestants on the precise nature of sin and human freedom. While Luther and Calvin both emphasized the depravity and bondage of human nature, and consequently espoused predestination, the Anabaptists and subsequent Mennonites held that human nature had not totally fallen and that some freedom remained even after the fall—the freedom to respond to God's grace. This had profound implications for ethics; human beings were expected, under the power of the Holy Spirit to be obedient to divine commands. In this optimism concerning human nature there is some commonality with Muslims. Where there is a fundamental difference is in the role of sacrifice and atonement. Jesus, according to the Qur'an, did not die on the cross as a sacrifice for human sinfulness. Rather, humans have direct access to God and God's forgiveness. Mennonites, on the other hand, have historically sided with the mainline Protestant and Catholic traditions in affirming the atoning and sacrificial work of Christ. In short, Muslims have an even more optimistic anthropology than do Mennonites.

Eighth, one final comparison is that of *community*. Both Shi'ite Muslims and Mennonite Christians stress the importance of community over against rugged individualism. This was dramatically illustrated in the 2002 dialogue when a number of us visited an Older Order Mennonite family north of Waterloo. Invited inside his modest home by the Mennonite farmer, and sitting in a circle

Challenges Encountered by the Monotheistic Religions (continued)

ignorance. We have taken some steps toward better mutual appreciation with the Christian world. We have sent some of our students to Western universities to study Christianity. For my part, I have visited several European and American countries, discussed the issue with Church authorities of different denominations, and had dialogue with university professors. We also invited some Church authorities to teach in our university in Iran, some of whose sessions were broadcast through the Islamic Republic Television. Therefore, the first goal of such visits and discussions is to become familiar with other religions and to overcome misunderstandings.

The second aim is that it is our duty, not only as people of religion but also as responsible human beings, to cooperate in the face of what threatens humanity as a whole. Atheism, irreligiousness, the destruction of moral values, and corruption are devastating human society. The two waves of disbelief and moral corruption collaborate and advance together. We, as followers of divine religions, have a duty to fight these two movements. We have to unite on our commonalities, dispense with differences, and rise against this common enemy by doing two things; first, to set up a strong intellectual and rational-philosophical movement to strengthen religious beliefs through efficient and robust reasoning; and second, to start an ethical movement against corruption and libertinism

May the Almighty God help us guide people to Him, His path, and His divine values!

—Ayatullah Mesbah

Ayatullah Mesbah lives in Qom, Iran, and is based at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute (IKERI) there.

This is drawn his remarks in a discussion with several Christian church leaders in 1998.



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around the Mennonite couple with their two small children, the Muslims took full advantage of this opportunity to ask questions like: "Why do you not have electric lights?" The Old Order answered: "Because that's what our church teaches." This surprised and delighted the visitors from Iran. Here in the midst of modern, western, North American culture, known for its decadent individualism, was an example of simple life and objective communal authority taking precedence over individual beliefs. Here again we need to be reminded by our Muslim brothers and sisters of something valuable in our own heritage: communal ties which are increasingly threatened by an individualistic consumerist society.

May we be as open to the Muslims as they have been to us. At our final session in Qom, one of us asked whether we could end in prayer. Ayatolla Mesbah replied: "Of course. You pray, and we'll say 'Amen'." That's the spirit in which we want to continue our experiment in mutual understanding and conversion.

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