

REVELATION and AUTHORITY

Shi'ah Muslim – Mennonite Christian Dialogue II

INTRODUCTION

A. James Reimer

Qom, known as the most “religious” city of Iran, was the location of phase two of an academic Shi’ite Muslim–Mennonite Christian dialogue held February 15-16, 2004, as part of a two-week visit. Eight North American Mennonites joined a similar number of Muslim scholars for an intensive but cordial two-day discussion at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, on the topic of “Revelation and Authority.” This unusual scholarly interchange of ideas is the culmination of an exchange program between Mennonites and Iranian Muslims, initiated by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and the Imam Khomeini Institute in 1997. This exchange was the consequence of MCC’s relief work after a severe 1990 earthquake in Iran. As part of the exchange the two institutions sponsor a Mennonite couple living and studying in Qom (Matthew and Laurie Pierce) and two Iranian doctoral students studying at the Toronto School of Theology (Mohammad Farimani and Yousef Daneshvar). The Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (TMTC) helps to oversee the academic aspect of the exchange in Toronto and co-organizes the dialogue with the Khomeini Institute.

Phase one of the dialogue, sponsored by TMTC, MCC and the Khomeini Institute, took place in Toronto in October 2002. The topic was “Muslims, Christians and the Challenges of Modernity.” Four Iranian scholars, including a translator, flew in from Iran to Toronto for that event. Their stay comprised not only intellectual discussions but also visits to a Mennonite church service in Tavistock, Ontario, a modest Old Order Mennonite Farm, an upscale Niagara Mennonite home, and Niagara Falls. Proceedings were published in *CGR* 21.3 (Fall 2003).

For the 2004 event a group of North American Mennonite scholars were invited to Iran, and were treated to typical Iranian hospitality and generosity over a two-week period, February 11–22, under the leadership of Professor Aboulhassan Haghani of the Khomeini Institute. This was religiously and politically a propitious time for such a visit, given both the 25th anniversary

celebrations in Teheran of the 1979 Islamic revolution on February 11 (the day of our arrival), and the elections for Parliament on February 20. Our group was probably the only Western delegation to be ushered into the stands to observe the 25th anniversary celebrations, together with politicians, Muslim clerics, representatives from various religious groups, media and other dignitaries to see the parachutes, fireworks, musical and oral tributes, and to listen to the President of Iran. An estimated two million people were reportedly on the streets of Teheran that day. At the end of our visit, on election day, two of us were briefly allowed into a polling booth to observe the carefully monitored and orderly voting procedure.

The Khomeini Institute paid the entire cost of our stay. We took tours of a prisoner of war camp that is now a museum, the former American Embassy grounds, palaces of the former Shahs and the simple dwelling of the revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini. We visited beautiful Kashan with its lavish pre-revolutionary homes, and Esfahan with its seventeenth-century square and market, exquisite ancient mosques, the old Armenian Christian Church, and the Zoroastrian “Temple of Fire.” Particularly memorable was the home of the late Murtada Mutahhari, an Islamic thinker whose many volumes are now being published as collected works. Drafter of the constitution of the Islamic Republic and personal confidante of Ayatollah Khomeini, he was assassinated three months after the revolution.

Conference participants were carefully chosen. Most of the Muslim scholars had received doctorates from Western universities—McGill, Canada; Manchester, England; Innsbruck, Austria. With the exception of Yousef Daneshvar, Muslim participants were professors at the Khomeini Institute. The Christian participants all had some knowledge of Islam, some like David Shenk, Jon Hoover (Cairo), and Roy Hange having spent much of their professional careers studying and writing about Islam and Christianity. Christian participants from TMTC were professors A. James Reimer and Lydia Harder, and students Phil Enns and Susan Harrison. Ed Martin, Director of MCC’s Central and Southern Asian Program, and Matthew and Laurie Pierce also participated. In this issue of *CGR* we are publishing four representative papers from among those presented at the event, two from each side of the dialogue.

Themes in the formal presentations included revelation, reason, authority, law, conscience, canonical texts, religious experience, and Islamic and Christian views of God. The dominant motif was the relation of revelation to reason.

Islam sees no fundamental contradiction between a high view of human reason (a gift from God) and a high view of revelation (the divine will as revealed through Gabriel to the Prophet Mohammad in the Qur'an). This is related to the positive Islamic anthropology: human beings are naturally oriented toward the divine. The Christian doctrine of original sin, which has corrupted human nature, including reason, and requires a sacrificial atonement, has no equivalent in Islamic theology.

The Qur'an does mention the forbidden eating from a tree that has negative consequences for Adam and Eve, but it is not identified as the tree of the "knowledge of good and evil" as in Genesis 3. Rather, the knowledge of good and evil is not negative but a positive, natural knowledge planted within the human conscience by God. All human beings have a tendency to sin, but this is not an inherited condition. While human beings are not perfect, there is no excuse; God expects them to use their reason fully in determining right and wrong, and to follow the path of obedience. God is ready to forgive directly those who repent, without any need for sacrificial mediation. In their high view of reason, freedom and human responsibility and their rejection of the more severe Protestant notions of original sin, Mennonite Christians have something in common with Shi'ite Muslims.

Most remarkable in the course of the dialogue was the respect that both sides showed toward each other's texts. Both have a high view of the authority of the sacred book—one reason that the theme "Revelation and Authority" was chosen. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this was professor Hossein Tofiqhi, who has taught Christianity to Muslim students for some forty years. He knows the four gospels from memory and referred to Jesus as "our Lord Jesus Christ" on a number of occasions. That expression does not imply the divinity of Jesus but does express the respect Muslims have for Jesus as a great prophet. There are, of course, substantive and methodological differences in how Muslims and Christians interpret their respective texts.

Apparent throughout our discussions was an increasing level of trust between our two communities of learning. Pivotal to this trust is the sincerity of the dialogue, the common search for truth, and the firm conviction that the life of the intellect must not be separated from devotion, piety and moral integrity. This was mentioned a number of times and in the concluding session

with the head of the Khomeini Institute, Ayatollah Mesbah, who belongs to the 70-member elected Council of Experts responsible for choosing and overseeing the Grand Leader of Iran. He has the ear of the Grand Leader and gives his official sanction to the Mennonite-Shi'ite dialogue.

In his closing address Ayatollah Mesbah called on all religions to join forces against secularism and the decay of moral values, especially among the youth. "We sense a growing spirit of community and solidarity between us as we together search for truth and greater faithfulness and righteousness," I said in response. "We sincerely hope that our exchange and the community of trust that we have already developed may continue to grow and be a sign of hope for much greater mutual understanding between our two traditions and also between our countries." We presented Ayatollah Mesbah with the three-volume *History of Mennonites in Canada* by Frank H. Epp, the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* by Ted Regehr, and the Fall 2003 issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*.

II

My 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 altered the way I do theology: what I thought was the periphery has changed the center.

The purpose of these dialogues is to promote mutual understanding and mutual conversion. I don't mean conversion of Muslims to Christianity, let alone Anabaptism, or Christians to the Islamic faith (though that could 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 will give an example from each side. Yousef Daneshvar once said to me, "You Mennonites are such good and pious people, but why do I never see you pray?" I could have given him the usual, mundane answer: "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 lives that we have frequently undervalued the spiritual roots of all righteous living. I began taking more seriously my 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 stress the importance of nonviolence, peace and reconciliation that, I believe, they have come to reread the Qur’an with a new eye to its message of peace.

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 am astounded at how generously the Qur’an can be interpreted with respect to other religions, and I have been struck anew at the embracing, inclusive attitude of biblical texts toward other all peoples.

III

What follows are some observations about the rationale for our dialogue, and the differences and similarities in our approaches. First, we are engaged in a common search for *truth* that lies beyond either tradition. Both Christianity and Islam are monotheistic and universalistic; 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 idolatry. This is why Mohammad the prophet is not considered divine; he is an ordinary human being who became a vehicle for divine revelation. Here Christians, particularly Mennonites, who take so seriously the teachings of the *human* Jesus have something to learn. Western thought, including theology, has since the time of the Enlightenment lost the sense of transcendence. The human Jesus has often been deified, without recognition that the fight of the early Christians against heresies was an attempt to maintain the transcendent mystery of the one God. While they believed in the deity of Christ, they were careful to formulate this deity in such a way as

to avoid blasphemous claims about the human Jesus. It was Jesus as the Christ that was God. We could well stand to be reminded of the radical transcendence of the divine.

Ethics is the third point of comparison. Here perhaps we have the greatest affinity with the Shi'ites. We have a common trait: *strong moral-ethical consciousness*. This takes on somewhat different forms but nevertheless there is mutual recognition of the importance of holding belief and morality, spirituality and ethics together. The reason that such an exceptional bond of mutual respect has developed between the two sets of scholars is that both groups 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 surprise some Mennonites; surely we have not emphasized the role of the intellect, philosophy, and speculative thought nearly to the degree that Muslims have. While this is true, there is within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition an appreciation 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.

Fifth, for both traditions the *sacred text* is authoritative and viewed as revelatory. True, 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 Muslims' twelfth Imam, Imam Ali, who they 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. Where Mennonites and 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 through an earthly government that the conditions may be prepared for the coming of the twelfth Imam.

This brings us to a seventh 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—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 obey divine commands. This optimism about human nature finds some commonality with the Muslims. The fundamental difference is in the role of sacrifice and atonement. Jesus, according to the Qur’an, did not die 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 traditions in affirming the atoning and sacrificial work of Christ. In short, Muslims have an even more optimistic anthropology than do Mennonites.

The eighth and final comparison is that of *community*. Both groups stress the importance of community over against rugged individualism. This was dramatically illustrated in our 2002 dialogue when several of us visited an Older Order Mennonite family north of Waterloo. Invited by the Mennonite farmer inside his modest home, and sitting in a circle around the couple with their two small children, the Muslims asked, “Why do you not have electric lights?” The Old Order answer: “Because that’s what our church teaches.” This surprised and delighted the visitors; here in the midst of modern, western, North American culture, with its decadent individualism, was an example of simple life and objective communal authority taking precedence over individual beliefs. Our Muslim brothers and sisters can remind us of something valuable in our own heritage: communal ties 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. Ayatollah 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.¹

Note

¹ This introduction is an edited adaptation of my “Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Iran” in *TMTC Newsletter*; Vol. 12, No. 1 (October 2004), and “Mennonite-Christian and Shi’ite-Muslim Dialogue: An Experiment in Mutual Understanding,” in *MCC Peace Office Newsletter*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (January-March 2006).

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