Making friends in Iran: Lessons learned from the Mennonites

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Lessons Learned from the Mennonites

The purpose of this paper is to bring some exposure to the unique partnership that the North American Mennonites have formed with Shi‘i Muslims in Iran, highlighting the method adopted by the Mennonites and extracting any points that may be helpful to those who are interested in Muslim-Christian dialogue. With this goal in mind, I will first review some of the traditional ways inter-faith dialogue has been approached, noting some of the problems inherent in these approaches. Next, I will give a substantive review of how the Mennonite work in Iran evolved and how the group has chosen to approach inter-faith dialogue. This will fill the bulk of my presentation, given that it is, I believe, a very unique program. Finally, I will offer some suggestions that I have gleaned from the Mennonites work in Iran that may be of some assistance to anyone pursuing inter-faith dialogue.

By way of introduction I would like to make a couple of personal notes about my involvement with this program so in order to shed light on how I approach inter-faith dialogue. I am a student of Islam, and I am currently working on my doctorate in Islamic Studies at Boston University. My studies have brought me into extensive contact with Muslims, and as I am a Christian, this contact has entailed inter-faith dialogue at its most basic level. Prior to my time in Iran I lived several years in Egypt and Yemen, but I did
not turn my attention to formal inter-faith dialogue until I began working with the
Mennonite Central Committee in Iran in 2003. My three years in that country were spent
in the city of Qom as a part of the Mennonite-Shi‘i exchange program I will describe in a
few moments. My work in inter-faith dialogue has been almost exclusively confined to
Christian-Muslim dialogue, and my comments in this paper will be limited to interactions
between those two faiths. A discussion of whether or not my suggestions for dialogue are
useful in interaction between persons of other faiths is beyond the scope of this paper.

**Approaches to Christian-Muslim Dialogue**

It is not necessary here to attempt a historical retelling of how Muslim-Christian
dialogue has unfolded over the last century. In any event, that is not my area of expertise.
It is important to note, however, that even a quick perusal of books written on this topic
reveal certain patterns of dialogue, namely that of conference-style interaction. Even if
we simply speak only of inter-faith projects since the watershed Vatican II, the dominant
*modus operandi* has been that of academic-style conferences. Recent decades have
witnessed a host of important Muslim-Christian dialogue conferences and, whether they
were enjoined by the Vatican or the World Council of Churches, there has been a
consistent emphasis on conferences. This form of communication, which has worked
well for businesses, political enterprises, and academic exchanges, has been extended to
inter-faith dialogue. There has been relatively little questioning of how appropriate this
form of communication is for the task, and what other options might be available. I
recognize that I am making sweeping generalizations, but I think the assessment remains
valid even in light of some notable exceptions.
I would like to make several observations on dialogue conferences based on my experience as a participant in several such gatherings. Normally inter-faith dialogue conferences are comprised of handfuls of religious leaders from either or all parties, usually drawn from the clergy or the academy. These specialists gather and present papers on a given topic with the idea that the concerns and research of each presenter represent, at least to some extent, those of his/her larger religious community. Upon reflection about this habit, two concerns have come to my mind.

My first concern is that the participants typically do not know each other prior to the conference and have only abstract bases for communication. And in the case of all but local meetings, the parties rarely have the ability to maintain any relationship that might have been sparked by the conference dialogue. This means most conferences do very little to build actual interpersonal relationships. While this is certainly not always the case, it is common and, I believe, undermines the whole project. It means the dialogue conference has the same or similar effect on the participants that reading a book would. If the intention of dialogue is to bring religious communities together in a way that books cannot, there must be an emphasis on building lasting interpersonal relationships that have the opportunity to blossom and transform individuals’ lives.

My second concern overlaps with the first. Based on my own observation, I believe that a deep lack of trust between the parties involved often underlies Muslim-Christian dialogue conferences, and that the conferences in question often do little to remedy this lack. Communication in these forums is sometimes characterized by defensiveness and apprehension. I believe this is partly a result of the fact that the parties involved have not usually had the opportunity to develop a basis for communication prior
to the conference dialogue. The party that has less political and economic power can be particularly defensive and apprehensive due to having more to lose by transparent communication. Lack of trust, like the lack of personal relationships, can undermine the goals of dialogue.

I don’t mean to sound overly cynical about the dialogue conference approach. It has yielded some good results and, I believe, will likely play an important role in the future of Muslim-Christian relations. However, at this stage in the development of Christian-Muslim relations other approaches may be more appropriate. On that note, I turn to the specifics of Mennonite-Shi‘i relations, how they have evolved, and the approach the Mennonites have chosen.

**Mennonites in Iran**

Mennonite involvement in Iran has been through the auspices of the Mennonite Central Committee, or MCC. As a side note, I might add that the Mennonites should not be confused with the Amish, although both groups are part of the Anabaptist strain of Christianity. While there remain small groups of “old-order Mennonites” who refrain from using certain modern conveniences, the vast majority of Mennonites today do not hold such conceptions about tradition and modernity, and their lifestyles are often indistinguishable from those of their neighbors. Mennonites today, while retaining some cultural vestiges of their Swiss-German or Dutch past, typically blend rather seamlessly into North American Christianity, with the notable exception of their position on war and violence. Most Mennonites today are pacifists, adhering to varying degrees and theories pertaining to non-violence and non-violent resistance.
MCC is the service branch of the North American Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. First formed in 1920 in response to a famine in the former Soviet Union, MCC continues to work primarily in relief and development both internationally and domestically. MCC has personnel in 53 countries world-wide and gives some level of financial assistance to programs in 70 countries. Only recently has the organization begun to make inter-faith dialogue an articulated part of its vision. In 2004 the MCC International Program Department chose to make inter-faith bridge building a programmatic focus for the next five years. Much of MCC’s most important work in this area, however, began earlier. Concerning work in Iran, inter-faith bridge building “has been a primary focus of the MCC program…since its beginning in 1990.”

MCC’s first involvement with Iran came after a devastating earthquake in June 1990 which killed more than 35,000 people, mainly in the Gilan and Zanjan provinces of northern Iran. MCC assistance in the aftermath of the earthquake was in partnership with the Iranian Red Crescent Society. This partnership was expanded and strengthened in subsequent years when MCC helped fund relief distributions to the one million-plus Iraqi refugees in Iran after the first Persian Gulf War in 1991. Throughout the 1990s this partnership continued to grow as MCC funded a number of relief projects following earthquakes, floods, and draughts in Iran. The MCC/IRCS relationship continues to this day, and its most recent expression has been MCC’s assistance in funding temporary housing and schools in Bam, Iran where another devastating earthquake occurred in December of 2003.

Most of MCC’s work in Iran has been done with little to no personnel on the ground, instead taking the form mainly of financial support for work that the Red
Crescent Society is directing. Relationships, however, did form between staff of each of the two institutions, and over time MCC informed their contacts in Iran that they would like to facilitate personal interaction between North Americans and Iranians by placing personnel in Iran. In 1998, opportunity knocked. Iranian contacts informed MCC that there was an educational institute in Iran that was seeking a Christian partner with which to have a religious exchange. The uniqueness of this opportunity became clear as the details were established.

The institute which came to be MCC’s educational partner in Iran was the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, henceforth simply referred to as the Institute. The Institute is located in Qom, Iran and headed by Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi. According to the arrangement, the Institute in Iran sends two graduate-level students, along with their immediate families, to Toronto to study Christian theology and western philosophy in the Toronto School of Theology, under the auspices of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre. The students remain in Toronto until they receive their PhD degrees and then are replaced by two more Iranian students. MCC chooses two couples to study for three years on a non-degree track at the Institute in Qom. The couples sent on behalf of MCC study Shi‘i Islam and other topics related to Islam and/or Iran. After three years the North American students are replaced by two more couples of MCC’s choosing. All expenses of the Iranians in Toronto are covered by MCC, and all expenses of the North Americans in Qom are covered by the Institute. In this way, each group hopes to cultivate increased understanding and better relationships between Christians and Muslims in general, and North Americans and Iranians in particular.
Qom has provided an exceptionally interesting environment for the students who go to Iran. It is undoubtedly the most conservative city in all of Iran, and it is the center for all Shi’i religious scholarship in Iran today. The city is home to many of the most well-known and influential religious leaders in Iran, and it was the place where the late Ayatollah Khomeini did most of his teaching. With a population of a little over a million, the city revolves around the Shi’a seminary system. Dozens of the most important seminaries and most prominent scholars as well as tens of thousands of students reside in Qom. The identity of the city is inextricably entwined with the teaching and study of Shi’a Islam, and to my knowledge no non-Muslims outside the MCC students live in the city. That non-Muslims have virtually no access to Qom is a given; indeed most Iranians express shock when they find that non-Muslim students are studying in Qom for the purpose of inter-faith dialogue.

To top it all off, the particular institute with which MCC has partnered is headed by one of the most conservative Ayatollahs in Iran—Ayatollah Taqi Misbah Yazdi. Even among the students of Qom, one of Iran’s most conservative demographics, Ayatollah Misbah is remarkable for his strict political conservatism. Having studied with both Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Tabataba’i prior to the revolution, Misbah remains one of the senior authorities on religious matters in Iran. He is a member of the Assembly of Experts and is often pitted against reformers like Rafsanjani. More recently his name has been appearing in Western media for his alleged position as close spiritual advisor to the current Iranian president, Ahmedinijad. Despite Misbah’s political conservatism, he has been one of the foremost proponents of inter-religious dialogue among the Shi’a clergy. He was excited to establish this exchange program with MCC and has
consistently defended its value. This fact serves partly to illustrate the complexity and
nuance of positions held by Iranian religious leaders pigeonholed as “hardliners” by the
western media.

In the last couple of decades, sparked by increasing involvement and partnership
with groups representing other faiths, the Mennonite Central Committee has begun to
articulate its methodology for inter-faith interaction. The phrase “interfaith bridge
building,” rather than “interfaith dialogue,” has been chosen to describe MCC’s work in
this regard. Dialogue connotes exclusively verbal interchange. MCC sees value in and
seeks to encourage forms of communication and relationship-building other than and in
addition to dialogue. MCC has dubbed its approach the “diakonal way,” intending to
emphasize the conviction that mutual service is the appropriate foundation from which to
build relationships. Diakonal is derived from the Greek word for “service”: diakonia. The
key to this approach is its emphasis on action through service as the central way to
building helpful, high-quality interfaith relationships. MCC does not intend to limit its
interfaith bridge building to service. On the contrary, formal, verbal dialogue has been
initiated by MCC once strong interfaith relationships exist. However, service is
considered the cornerstone and constant of the relationship. In the case of the work in
Iran, interfaith relations began with MCC’s partnership with the Iranian Red Crescent
Society, later bearing fruit in the form of a student exchange program. Even since the
advent of the exchange program, however, MCC’s partnership and support of the Red
Crescent Society’s work in Iran remains a vital part of the interfaith relationship. Iran
provides an excellent example, therefore, of the approach that MCC seeks to advocate
and model.
Since the establishment of the student exchange program in 1998, the work of interfaith bridge building between Mennonites and Shi’a Muslims has expanded even further. MCC and the Imam Khomeini Institute have partnered to host semi-regular dialogue conferences. The first of these conferences took place in Toronto, and the second in Qom. The next conference is slated for this summer in Toronto around the topic of “Reason and Spirituality.” A distinguishing feature of these conferences has been the level of familiarity, vulnerability and trust exhibited by both parties. Each conference has had the same core of scholars as participants in order to maintain continuity, with new scholars also in attendance. Some of the relationships now go back nearly a decade, and the quality of these relationships greatly influences the degree to which each party is able to be transparent with the other.

The most recent development in this ongoing relationship has a political cast. In the summer of 2006, MCC leaders became greatly concerned that the current US administration was embarking on a path that might lead to armed conflict with Iran. This led them to express their concerns to their Iranian counterparts in the exchange, inquiring about ways they might help ease tensions and promote understanding. Out of this conversation came the proposal that MCC organize a group of various North American Christian leaders in New York City to meet with Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for informal discussion after the latter’s presentation to the UN delegation in September of 2006. This came to pass on September 20th. Around 50 Christian leaders from mainline protestant, catholic, orthodox, evangelical, and historic peace churches were in attendance. Conversation with the Iranian President focused on ways that the tensions between the United States and Iran might be eased and how better relationships
Suggestions and Observations

I believe MCC’s work in Iran has been successful up to this point and continues to blossom into new levels of interfaith bridge building, including, but not limited to, dialogue conferences. At this point we might ask ourselves: what can be gleaned from the approach modeled by the Mennonite Central Committee? I would like to focus on three points I feel can be learned from MCC’s approach. The first, and I believe the most significant, is that service is an excellent foundation for interfaith bridge building and dialogue. As mentioned earlier, much of Christian-Muslim dialogue in the form of conferences is plagued by a lack of trust and a defensive spirit, both of which undermine the whole project. Muslims and Christians have often emphasized the spoken and written word in their interactions with each other, but the old adage about actions speaking louder than words might be applied in this venue to all of our advantage. Service can be a far more effective way of gaining trust and respect than speech. The ideal service, I suggest, is not limited to serving the other party. While this is certainly appropriate at
times, it can also foster unhealthy dependencies, hubris, and questions about the
intentions of both parties. MCC, recognizing that this is sometimes the case, encourages
mutual service, work in which the two parties together evaluate a need and work together
to fill it. In this way both parties remain on a level playing field and neither assumes a
role of power. Christians and Muslims have tremendous common ground in their concern
for the poor, the hungry, and the orphaned. Acting in partnership to meet these needs
form an ideal basis for exchanges of a more explicitly theological nature.

A second strength of MCC’s work in Iran from which we can learn is its emphasis
on extended education, i.e. - learning about the other party while living with them. This
combines the idea of Christian presence with explicitly educational goals—each element
being crucial. Although there are significant and growing communities of Muslims within
North America, much of Christian-Muslim dialogue is hampered by cultural differences.
No academic paper, conference, or book is an adequate substitute for just one year of
living in another culture. Exchanges allow this invaluable first-hand learning about the
other to take place, and both student exchange programs and teacher exchange programs
are excellent formats in which this kind of learning can occur. To my knowledge
exchanges such as these have a good deal of untapped potential as sources of dialogue
between Christian and Muslim groups. The United States government has long
recognized the power of these types of exchanges—consider, for example, the Fulbright
Fellowships offered to American students to study abroad and to foreign students to study
in America. Christian and Muslim groups would do well to explore more relationships on
this level.
Finally, I think we can learn from partnerships like the one between MCC and the Imam Khomeini Institute. This Institute is not a natural partner for MCC. The two organizations have widely differing views on most issues. I would argue, however, that this disparity serves not to undermine the dialogue but to enrich it. It has too often been the case that Christian groups partner with the most liberal, pro-Western Muslim circles they can find in order to emphasize commonality. But these relationships can be limited and misleading if they are not coupled with exchanges with Muslim groups that have more conservative and perhaps less palatable viewpoints. In many cases it is the latter groups that more accurately represent larger groups of Muslims, and such groups can bring greater legitimacy to the project of dialogue in the eyes of average Muslims than can more liberal groups. Christian groups would do well to expend greater creativity in exploring partnerships. I can attest that there is a host of institutions in Iran and other parts of the Muslim world that are very open to and eager for these kinds of relationships but who aren’t seriously considered as potential partners by Christian groups.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to make some remarks about the personal effect of working in this kind of extended dialogue. After having lived in Iran for three years as a part of MCC’s student exchange program, I can testify that it is a genuinely transforming experience. My primary role in Iran was to be a student of Islam, not a teacher of Christianity. But just days after our arrival in Iran, when my wife and I first met with Ayatollah Misbah, the director of the Institute, he told us very directly that we should not feel any pressure to become Muslims. He told us that there would certainly be those
among our fellow-students who would encourage us to become Muslims out of their own religious devotion. But, he reiterated that he had invited us to Iran in order to live there as Christians and as witnesses to what Christians believe and how they live. If we ever felt inclined to become Muslim, he explained, we should go back to America, because they wanted us to be in Iran as faithful Christians. While I continue to consciously regard myself as a Christian, I cannot say that conversion did not take place. In fact, I would argue that conversion must take place—not conversion in the sense of giving up one tradition for another, but conversion in the more literal sense: a change in character, form, or function. I am not the same Christian that I was before I went to Iran. I pray differently. I fast differently. I conceive of God and revelation differently. And each of these changes came out of my engagement with Islam. I was converted while in Iran, not to Islam, but to a different understanding of my Christian faith, an understanding that is informed by Islam.

Peter Dula, former MCC program coordinator in Iraq, wrote a brief but wonderful article on the Christian grounds for embracing the good wherever it is found.iii The result of such an approach may have some surprising results. Effective dialogue, I believe, will show itself not just in greater academic knowledge of the other but also in a transformation of the self in light of the other’s beauty.

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The childhood friend whose role ended one hour into the opening after confessing to the main character as he was about to set off into his journey. The one many players sympathized with as the main character would meet another girl who would cling onto him during his journey. If I remain in this village, in the future I'll be the losing love interest?! I Reincarnated as the Hero’s Childhood Friend Who Was the Losing Love Interest, so I Changed Jobs to Alchemist. Yuusha-sama no Osananajimi to Iu Shokugyou ni Tensei Shitanode, ChÅgÅ-shi ni Jobuchenji Shimasu. Learning lessons from the past. Many past societies collapsed or vanished, leaving behind monumental ruins such as those that the poet Shelley imagined in his sonnet, Ozymandias. By collapse, I mean a drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/economic/social complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time. Perhaps there are some practical lessons that we could learn from all those past collapses. But there are also differences between the modern world and its problems, and those past societies and their problems. We shouldn't be so naive as to think that study of the past will yield simple solutions, directly transferable to our societies today. Make the most of the new and exciting place you live in. Instead of staying shut in your room â€“ go out and explore! 5. Lastly - donâ€™t be a wallflower. When you are miles from home, surrounded by people speaking an unfamiliar language and immersed in a foreign culture, it may feel incredibly difficult to be confident and involve yourself in conversations, especially with large groups of people. Nevertheless, try to persevere and make your voice heard. It is a big chance to learn about other cultures, traditions, languages IT’S GREAT :) GREETINGS :) up. 0 users have voted. Well, I guess it depends. I find it easier to make new friends from foreign countries than from my country. I simply prefer talking to foreign people - they have never heard of you before, they don’t judge. With time, we learn to make smarter choices. 5. We Can’t Control Everything. In time, we learn that there are so many things in this world that are never truly within our control. For instance, going to school and studying in a classroom from books because it is a law to do so are just a few things that are out of our control and we need to do. A good teacher will teach you that it is common to keep making mistakes as they are the best ways to learn. Itâ€™s only human to make mistakes and they contribute considerably towards oneâ€™s overall personal development. Making mistakes will teach you to be humble, help you discover who you are and live a life without regrets. Mistakes, in the end, will provide excellent learning opportunities. 10. In the End, You Control Your Own Life.