

# ANABAPTIST-MENNONITE SCHOLARS NETWORK NEWSLETTER

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## Perspectives on Mennonite–Shi‘a Dialogue

*By Ryan Schellenberg, editor*

When northern Iran was struck by a devastating earthquake in June 1990, MCC partnered with the Iranian Red Crescent Society to provide relief. This partnership continues to bear fruit in opportunities for MCC to be involved in Iranian relief distribution; it has also blossomed into a unique opportunity for Mennonite scholars and theologians to engage with their Shi‘ite counterparts. The Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre and the Toronto School of Theology welcomed their first Iranian exchange students 10 years ago; meanwhile, MCC has sponsored North American Mennonites to study in Qom, Iran.

Since 1998, when the student exchange program began, this Shi‘a–Mennonite dialogue has become multifaceted and diverse. Joint theological conferences have occurred in Toronto (“Muslims, Christians and the Challenges of Modernity,” 2002), Qom (“Revelation and Authority,” 2004), and Waterloo (“Spirituality,” 2007). This past October, a delegation of educators from six Mennonite universities spent a week in Iran, visiting universities in Tehran and Qom. Their fascinating blog is available at <http://jdarylbyler.wordpress.com>. And, in the midst of growing political tension between Iran and the West, MCC has coordinated a series of meetings with Iranian President Ahmadinejad—most recently a controversial meeting with American religious leaders this September.

This ongoing dialogue has been controversial, both within and without Mennonite circles. It has received media coverage from news agencies as diverse as Al Jazeera and the Toronto Star ([www.aljazeera.com/news/newsfull.php?newid=106167](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/newsfull.php?newid=106167); [www.thestar.com/article/214357](http://www.thestar.com/article/214357)), and the conference at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo was disrupted by protests from Iranian expatriates.

The contributors to this edition of the newsletter have been involved in the dialogue in a variety of ways. Susan Kennel Harrison (p. 4) coordinated the student exchange

at the Toronto School of Theology from its beginning until 2007. She has built meaningful relationships with Iranian students; thus she has wrestled with the twin face of this dialogue, which consists of deep, personal friendships but also of politically-charged, public discussions. I was struck by her challenge not to let pride in MCC's groundbreaking public work distract from the relationships that are the heart and substance of the dialogue.

Jon Hoover (p. 7), who teaches Islamic Studies at The Near East School of Theology in Beirut, has participated in all three theological conferences. Hoover reflects on his own journey into these discussions, describing dialogue as “that halting search for words that will give life to relationships.” Like Harrison, he warns us not to “instrumentalize” relationships with our Shi‘ite friends.

Finally, Thomas Finger (p. 9) was twice invited to present a Christian perspective at Shi‘a theological conferences in Iran. He has also participated in meetings with President Ahmadinejad. Finger addresses critiques of Mennonite willingness to talk with Ahmadinejad, arguing that dialogue is a necessary alternative to the demonization that makes war possible.

Over the last number of years, the A-MSN Steering Committee has been discussing the possibility of transitioning the Network to function as an umbrella organization that includes Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars from a variety of disciplines and guilds. (At present, our membership is predominantly theological, although other scholars in the humanities and social sciences enrich our discussions.)

As an initial exploratory step, we're planning to communicate with other groups of Mennonite scholars and with organizers of other Mennonite academic conferences to discuss the possible benefits of cooperation. We would appreciate any feedback you have on this idea; and, if you are connected to a grouping of Mennonite scholars that we may have missed, please send me the information we will need to make contact with them. Email [AnabaptistScholars@gmail.com](mailto:AnabaptistScholars@gmail.com).

## Research Notes

In September 2007 Eerdmans published the second edition of my book, *Roman House Churches for Today: A Practical Guide for Small Groups*. It was first published by Herald Press in 1993 (titled *Paul and the Roman House Churches: A Simulation*) and used fairly widely in Mennonite context—at least enough to use up all the copies of the first printing! It was written for lay people and young adults.

The second edition includes more helps for teachers and group leaders. This is a sustained simulation of the house churches Paul wrote to in Romans, a letter carried by Pheobe of Cenchrea and interpreted to them by her. Each participant plays a role of a Jew or Gentile, slave, free, or freedperson in order to understand what the letter would have meant to its first audience. At the end of each of the 13 lessons are application-for-today questions to discuss.

The approach uses the "New Perspective" on Romans. Seminary or college classes could use it profitably along with John E. Toews' Believers Church Commentary on Romans (Herald 2004) or James D. G. Dunn's Romans commentary in the Word series.

I am presently working on a similar book on 1 Cor—Paul's first (extant) letter to house churches in and around Roman Corinth, which seem to have even worse factions and divisions than those in Rome. There are many juicy cultural and political parallels to current events in our churches and in today's Empire. I'm open to research leads or suggestions.

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*The Old Testament in the Life of God's People*, a Festschrift for Prof. Elmer Martens, is now scheduled for a 2009 release. Eisenbrauns has distributed page proofs and they are now being reviewed. The volume looks impressive. Contributors include Paul R. House, Marlene Enns, Douglas Carew, Franklyn L. Jost, Rolf P. Knierim, Ben C. Ollenburger, Waldemar Janzen, Pierre Gilbert, Alfred Neufeld, John E. Toews, Walter C. Kaiser, Timothy J. Geddert, Theodore Hiebert, Daniel I. Block, and Gordon Matties.

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## Transitions

**Thomas Finger** has been appointed Scholar in Residence at Bethany Seminary in Richmond, IN for the current academic year.

**Wilma Ann Bailey** has been promoted to Professor of Hebrew and Aramaic Scripture at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, IN.

**A. James Reimer**, of Conrad Grebel University College, was appointed "Distinguished Professor Emeritus" at the University of Waterloo at the October 25 Convocation of the University. Reimer was appointed Professor Emeritus at Conrad Grebel University College in Spring 2008.

The *New English Translation of the Septuagint* (NETS) was launched at the Septuagint Conference held at Trinity Western University Sept. 18-20, 2008. The papers presented at this Conference will be published in the next Congress Volume of *Septuagint and Cognate Studies*. I am submitting for this volume the paper I presented at the conference entitled "The Old Greek Version of Elihu." The Greek translation of Job is characterized by a literary but significantly abbreviated version of the Hebrew text; in Elihu this is 35% shorter, changing the role that the Elihu speeches have in the book of Job. This paper examines Elihu in the Old Greek translation, apart from the later additions to the translation in the Theodotion revisions.

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*News from AMBS: English Translation of the Marpeck Circle Kunstbuch*

An English translation of 42 writings by Pilgram Marpeck and his colleagues is nearing completion. Its goal is to make the 16th century theological and pastoral writings accessible to a 21st century general audience by a fluent and jargon-free translation as well as a commentary on each of the texts. This is a translation of the critical German edition of these texts published in 2006. The *Kunstbuch* will appear in the Classics of the Radical Reformation series with the hoped-for publication date of March 2009 (Pandora/Herald Press). John D. Rempel, professor of Theology and Anabaptist Studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, is the editor.

Since the appearance of a second canon-history study (*How the Bible Came to Be, Exploring the Narrative and Message*, Paulist 2004), I have completed a study program based on this volume that is scheduled to be published by Paulist Press in 2009. I am currently working on a critique of "questionable assumptions" (in a spate of recent studies) about when and why the first one-volume Bibles were created. Of particular interest is how canon historians are dealing with (or ignoring) the thesis of David Trobisch (*The First Edition of the New Testament*, Oxford 2000) and the credibility of what they offer in its place. Trobisch believes the manuscript evidence points strongly to the middle of the second century for this momentous event. I would be glad to hear from others interested in these issues.

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In addition to my writing in Chinese, I have recently published two papers in English: "At the Turn of Century—A Study of China Centenary Missionary Conference, 1907." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32, no.2 (April 2008); and "The North China Theological Seminary: Evangelical Theological Education in China in the early 1900s." In *Interpreting Contemporary Christianity: Global Processes and Local Identities*, eds. Ogbu U. Kalu and Alaine Low. Eerdmans, 2008.

My current research project is a study of the history of the Hunan Bible Institute in China (1916-1952), a sister school of the Biola University in L.A.

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### **Mennonite Scholars & Friends Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting Boston, MA**

**Reception**, Friday, Nov 21, 2008 7-8:30 pm  
Sheraton, Liberty B room

**Forum**, Saturday, Nov 22, 2008 9-11:30 a.m.  
Hynes Convention Center, Room 210

*Teaching Bible: Setting, Method, Agenda*

Presiding: Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo

Presenting: Jo-Ann Brant, Goshen College;  
Wes Bergen, Wichita State;  
Jon Isaac, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary

The session will be a conversation focusing on the pedagogical challenges and opportunities that Anabaptist scholars encounter in teaching the Bible in various educational settings: public university, Christian college/university, and seminary. The panelists representing these three settings will reflect on who their students are and how that matters, how faith and critical methodologies interact pedagogically, and whether there is an "Anabaptist agenda" in teaching the Bible, and, if so, what its impact is on pedagogy.

### **Memorial for Dr. Paul and Frances Hiebert**

A Memorial Academic Center is envisioned to provide needed classrooms for the Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College located in Shamshabad (near Hyderabad) India, in honor of Dr. Paul and Frances Hiebert. Dr. Hiebert, noted missiologist, author of 11 books and 150 articles on mission-related topics, died in March of 2007 and left \$50,000 for the school where once he was teacher and principal.

Contributions and pledges for the cost of the building (\$350,000), as of October, 2008, total more than half the amount needed. The North American steering committee (Dr. Paul Wiebe, Dr. Elmer Martens, Rev. Werner Kroeker) are encouraging gifts, but especially pledges for 2009 in anticipation of construction mid-2009.

Contributions large and small, tax deductible, are welcome and should be sent with memo line C0585 to:

MBMSI (USA) – 4867 E. Townsend Ave. Fresno, CA  
93727-5006.

MBMSI (Canada) – 302-3205 George Ferguson Way,  
Abbotsford, BC V2T 2K7 Canada.

# Journeying Together

By Susan Kennel Harrison

Who could have imagined that a friendship between Ed Martin and Dr. Seyed Kazam Sajjadpour and Dr. Kamal Karrazzi, begun nearly 20 years ago, would extend itself in so many ways? Their relationship, developed in the aftermath of the 1991 earthquake in Gilan province of Iran, birthed a student exchange between Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute (IKERI), as well as multiple other venues of interactions. (See further Peace Office Newsletter, Mennonite Central Committee, July-September 2001, Vol. 31, No. 3, p. 2.)

This student exchange takes place at the Toronto School of Theology (TST) in Toronto, Ontario and at IKERI in Qom, Iran. In the early years Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (TMTC) also took leadership in hosting the Iranian guests at the TST campus. Shiite Muslims from Iran are studying Christian theology at TST and Mennonites are studying Islam, Farsi and Persian literature at IKERI while living in Qom, Iran. In addition, academic conferences and publications between Mennonite and Shiite scholars have developed, and multiple learning tours of North Americans to Iran have taken place. Relationships have deepened and extended themselves so that MCC was asked, more than once, to facilitate meetings between Iranian president Ahmadinejad and religious leaders in America.

Outside and inside the Mennonite community there has been a desire to provide a clear label for what this exchange program is. Is it an inter-faith dialogue? Is it an academic dialogue? Shall we call it a theological dialogue? Is it more adequately represented in the phrase “a dialogue of life”? Is it peace-making? Bridge-building between nations? It is all of these and more.

September 2008 marked the 10th anniversary of Yousef Daneshvar Nilu’s family’s presence in Canada and Yousef’s enrollment in the Philosophy of Religion program at Regis College at TST. Daneshvar is soon to defend his thesis on the topic of *Reductionism in Karl Barth and Alame Tabatabai*. Yousef’s two children, Mojtaba and Maryam, attended the Rockway Mennonite Collegiate and are now enrolled at the University of Waterloo. Over the years Maasumeh, his wife, developed her seamstress talents and tried to develop a home business before she was able to find full time employment at RIM. The family is eagerly anticipating their daughter’s wedding in December.

Mohammad Farimani—also known as “Mutahari’s son”—his wife Atieh and son Morteza arrived in Toronto in the spring of 1999. Several years later their daughter,

Fatima, was born in Toronto at St. Joseph’s hospital! This was an occasion of much joy, and as Mohammad would say, a night when history was made. Being present for his daughter’s birth, something not practiced in Iran, was a gift to him that this exchange made possible. Farimani defended his dissertation in November 2006 on the topic of *General Presuppositions Made in Religion*. Both men suffered through the unexpected and sad loss of their advisor, Dr. George Schner, at a critical stage in their study program.

I had the privilege of journeying with these two scholars and their families from the beginning moments of their arrival in “the West” until 2007 when I “retired” from the coordinator role to pursue my own doctoral studies. Hosting them in Canada has meant a fascinating journey with them through the logistical arrangements and advocacy required to honor and accommodate their practical and spiritual needs as they sought to find a way to live their religious convictions among us, and in our secular society.

In many ways the genius or gift of this exchange program has been the way it literally created a place for us to meet and sustain relationships and ongoing conversation and encounter with one another over a lengthy period of time—something few interfaith encounters can truly offer. Another gift that emerged in this relationship was the discovery that we were roughly the same age and shared similar educational backgrounds and aspirations. A key rule for dialogue, as I once heard Arli Klasen put it, is having “like speaking to like.” This program created a place for that to happen; yet, our worldview differences were also profound, making the possibility to meet all the more valuable! As a western, married, Christian, feminist, Anglo woman I know of no other ways I could have built relationships with these particular people. And not just any relationships: deep transforming friendships; life-changing. My relationships established through the exchange have expanded to include other scholars at IKERI and friends in Iran who enrich my scholarship and are wonderful “thinking partners” and friends—thanks to email and Skype phone! When I agreed to coordinate the exchange I never expected to have my whole life reshaped by these relationships as it has been.

Building connections with the Mennonite communities of Southern Ontario and other Mennonite graduate students were high priorities and we tried many venues and styles of dialogue. Truthfully, I did not expect it to be so hard to build trust and relationship between my community and theirs. Initial meetings came easily enough, but few people invested in the relationships for

the long haul. I interpret this to be a reflection of our cultural reality as a whole, but this observation has truly challenged how I see my own faith community, confronting me with the gap between our talk and our walk. So the exchange, and the process of coordinating it, changed how I see my own faith community, not only my ideas about Islam and Iran. I have also had my eyes opened regarding the way a good program can have structures that clash with the overall objectives. I continue to think theologically about what programmatic structures create space for relationships. Or rather, I came to realize that how we structure our programs is as theological as the objectives. I was glad that we invested more in relationship building and less in issuing statements to governments, yet the relationships have compelled us to speak up.

I have often felt on the defensive for this program—a dynamic I did not understand. Being sympathetic to MCC's organizational structure, one that is grass-roots and seeks constituency support and involvement, it has been hard to know how to promote the *program* without violating my relationships with the *people*. Of course we have many interesting stories about our encounters, but it is not natural for one to publish a newspaper story whenever one has had a fascinating experience or conversation with their friend! So, then, how do we extend the experience and learning to those who are not directly involved themselves?

In these relationships we came to see and value one another's full humanity, to realize we are first people relating to other people, learning to accept each other's limitations, while recognizing that there are things we need to learn from one another; that we need each other. Our recognition of our need to take each other seriously as people of faith, and as seekers of God's will and good for all, grows deeper each year. We Mennonites have often assumed that we have something to teach the Shiite scholars about peace, but these Muslims have wondered why we thought they do not have a peace theology? In turn they have been asking us to consider developing more adequately our ideas about the place of justice in peacemaking. They have also challenged us to think more carefully about how we formulate and articulate our beliefs, while appreciating our commitment to concretely live our faith commitments.

Even though I was often asked if I intended to convert to Islam or why I was sympathetic (not prophetic) towards our guests, and was often considered naïve for unconditionally accepting them and believing that we can talk to each other, I find these relationships to have enriched my Christian faith profoundly, and to have taught me all I know about hospitality and care of people.

I came to understand Christianity much better, not only Mennonite faith, but Catholic faith and the historical de-

velopment of theology in general. In fact, as a result of these relationships I changed direction from New Testament doctoral studies into the Theological department PhD program. I was challenged to know more about Christian theology so I could better interact with these dialogue partners, but also to explore what it means to engage in dialogue with Muslims from the perspective of faith-based peacemaking as well as co-seekers of God's will. What does it mean to say we are seeking the truth together?

I didn't expect to be disappointed by my own faith community when I took this role on. The theological imperative to reach out and build friendship regardless of discomforts and inconvenience, and to practice the disciplines of careful listening and meeting regularly, seemed to me to be obvious parts of peace-making through building understanding and sustained relationships, yet I felt increasingly alone in this task.

I learned how inadequate book learning about others can be; how we cannot really understand without seeing the other's point of view—learning of the world through their language, their poems and their scriptures; how often we assign different meanings to a shared word or concept.

I learned how differently we learn and take in information and adjudicate its value. For Yousef and Mohammed one of the hardest adjustments to TST was being expected to think without other people "to think with." For every hour of class lecture they were accustomed to many hours of Socratic engagement with the material and seminary peers who, like them, sought to integrate and grasp the material through the act of wrestling through the questions aloud and together. They were accustomed to deep engagement with their professors, and tutoring the new students to the topic. Not only did they have to learn to read and write in our language, English, they had to learn a whole new way of learning and at times they found the isolation crippling.

I didn't expect to get "entangled" in politics and activism as a result of my relationship with the Iranians, coordinating this exchange, and participating in the academic conferences. I didn't expect to receive criticism from other Iranians in North America. I thought what MCC was trying to do for the common good was laudable and I am/was surprised when it was criticized as being colonial and unhelpful to certain people groups. I discovered that "love of enemy" language for peace-making was inadequate, and found myself leaning more and more on the "golden rule" and the simple yet complex command to love God and to love neighbor and myself. What does it look like to seek the best for all three: God, neighbor, self? I understood my role to be rooted in advocacy and bridging conversations, building points of connection

between our people, and, after a time, between people of the Abrahamic religions.

The fourth academic dialogue is in its planning stages, to be held in Iran, Lord willing. Leading up to Dialogue III—held at Conrad Grebel University College at the University of Waterloo, Ontario (2007)—Iranian expatriates voiced opposition to our project, demanding we cease our dialogue with IKERI, in particular. We followed through with our plans, although the first night's panel event was paralyzed and closed by the protesters. Ever since that night, during which I sat on the panel next to my Iranian dialogue partners and long time friends, I have wanted to ask my peace-making community: Why did we just sit there when those outsiders libeled our guests cruelly? Why didn't we stand up between the protesters and our guests? Why did we not defend their honor? Why did we, who far outnumbered the protestors in the room, not quietly stand up and build a human circle around them, and gently shepherd them out the door, and thus take back our conference? What kept us in our chairs? What paralyzed our bodies and voices when our friends, our guests, were being accused of things we

know they have never done and would not approve of? I've reluctantly come to the conclusion that it was our pride at being peacemakers that got in our way. Perhaps we were so busy feeling proud that we were going ahead with the conference, despite protest, despite unbidden police presence, in the name of "academic freedom" and "love of enemy," so focused on what *we* were doing, that we lost sight of the relationships themselves? We who judge Muslims as not knowing about forgiveness, as needing our peacemaking ethic, as needing our notions of human rights and dignity, we failed our own test that night. So I ask myself, after these ten years, have we lost site of the *people* and become proud of a *program*? My hope is that the next ten years will see us nurturing the gift of each other and the relationships that I hope God keeps giving us.

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## Call for Papers

### "Anabaptist Convictions After Marpeck" June 26–28, 2009, Bluffton University

Proposals are invited for papers that address the emergence and development of Anabaptist convictions in light of the work and life of Pilgram Marpeck and of the Marpeck circle. This interdisciplinary conference seeks to strengthen the development of contemporary Anabaptist convictions through a careful analysis of the emergence of historical Anabaptist convictions—especially those found in the Marpeck circle. The planning committee welcomes proposals from the standpoint of any academic discipline and solicits both presentations that are primarily descriptive as well as those that make prescriptive claims.

Suitable topics include, but are not limited to:

- the social and historical background of Marpeck and his circle
- the religious and political exigencies addressed by the texts of the Marpeck circle
- the theological and historical relationships between Marpeckites and other Anabaptist figures and groups
- the contemporary discovery and appropriation of Marpeck
- the illumination of historical and contemporary Anabaptist theological developments and controversies by the convictions of the Marpeck circle
- comparisons of Marpeckite convictions with those of other historical and contemporary Anabaptist circles

The conference will be held at Bluffton University, where a student center named after Pilgram Marpeck highlights the continuing visual and material impact of a once obscure sixteenth-century radical reformer. The conference is sponsored by Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholars Network (A-MSN), the Anabaptist Sociology and Anthropology Association (ASAA), and the Institute of Mennonite Studies (IMS). The conference planning committee includes the following members: Trevor Bechtel (A-MSN); Gerald Mast (ASAA); John Rempel (IMS, AMBS); John D. Roth (MHS). Paper proposals should be sent to John D. Roth or Trevor Bechtel. Mail proposals to Box 141, Bluffton University, 1 University Drive, Bluffton, OH 45817; or email to johndr@goshen.edu or bechtelt@bluffton.edu.

# Searching For Words

## A Personal Journey Through the Shi'i—Mennonite Dialogues

By Jon Hoover

The Shi'i Muslim–Mennonite Christian dialogue sequence that began in 2002 has been a great gift to me. It has not only put me in touch with our Iranian Shi'i dialogue partners; it has also given me a modest link into Mennonite academic theological discourse in North America. This gift, however, has presented its own peculiar challenges, not least of which has been figuring out what to say, especially when living and working, as I do, at a considerable distance from the scholarly centers of both communities.

The first dialogue in Toronto in 2002 surely makes my point. The set theme was “Muslims, Christians and the Challenges of Modernity,” and I was invited to contribute a paper, apparently on the grounds of my long-standing interest in Islam and my Mennonite ministerial credentials. At the time, I was living in Cairo, Egypt and finishing up my doctoral dissertation for a British university on the theodicy of a fourteenth-century Sunni theologian. I was buried away in medieval Arabic texts; I was immersed in Sunni Islam; I had not examined “modernity” with any seriousness for more than ten years; and my access to books of Christian—not to mention Mennonite—theology was limited. Maybe I should have turned down the invitation pleading inadequacy.

As it turned out, I took a cue from my doctoral work on Islamic theodicy and wrote a typological comparison of approaches to the problem of evil in the Christian and Islamic traditions. By showing that Christians and Muslims have approached the problem of evil in a similar range of ways, I sought to identify common ground for further discussion. I tenuously linked the paper to the dialogue theme of modernity with a perfunctory comment about my topic being all the more urgent in modern times in view of the great increase in suffering and evil. In surveying the dialogue later, James Reimer very graciously wrote of my paper, “While not directly connected with the theme of the dialogue, the problem of evil is surely pressing in the modern period” (*Conrad Grebel Review* 21.3 [2003], 9-10). And my Iranian respondent Hamid Parsania thought that I still had more to learn: my typological discussion had failed to do justice to the more mystical and all-encompassing Shi'i approach to evil because I “was approaching the subject from an Egyptian perspective, where the mystical-philosophical way of Islamic thinking is weak” (qtd. in *ibid.*, 10). Perhaps the deeper truth is that I was dissecting the topic from a “modern” analytical perspective.

To my pleasant surprise, I was invited to present at the next dialogue in Qom, Iran in 2004. This time the theme was “Revelation and Authority.” Again I puzzled long and hard over what to say. I was still in Egypt, working with the Roman Catholic Church, and my access to materials for Christian theological research was only slightly improved. Yet, my mind hearkened back several years to an awkward encounter that I had had with an Iranian Shi'i doctoral student in the UK. Immediately upon learning that I was a Christian, this young man started attacking the Trinity as irrational. Much to the embarrassment of the other Muslims present, he insisted that any math teacher knows that  $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$ , and he recommended that Christian theologians put an easy end to this Trinitarian nonsense with a joint declaration. Mulling over this encounter led me to see anew that Christian belief in the Trinity does not derive from a perverse desire to be irrational but from a saving encounter with God revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This “revelation” of God as triune was my fragile link to the “Revelation and Authority” theme of the Qom dialogue, and the result was a paper comparing the role of revelation in the Christian and Islamic doctrines of God. The Christian theological analysis in my paper was not entirely adequate, but the ensuing discussion was, I think, fruitful.

The third dialogue was held at Conrad Grebel University College at the University of Waterloo in late May 2007. The theme this time was “spirituality,” and the organizers exerted much effort to produce a coherent program. This meant that I had to work even harder to find a paper subject that would fit in. By now, however, I did not feel so isolated in my search for what to say. I had some sense of the culture of our conversations from the previous two dialogues. We were getting to know each other better, both as Shi'is and Mennonites and as Mennonites among ourselves. No doubt our Shi'i counterparts were learning to know each other better too as they interacted with us. But most importantly, a shared sense of search for mutual understanding was emerging among us all. My personal circumstances had also changed. In 2004 I moved to Beirut, Lebanon to teach Islamic Studies at the Near East School of Theology. This gave me access to the best Protestant theological library in the Middle East—still very small compared to theological libraries in North America—and it put me in regular contact with Lebanese Shi'is. Although I remained just as far removed from the centers of North American Mennonite and Iranian Shi'i learning geographically, I now found myself somewhat closer spiritually and intellectually. In consultation with the dialogue organizers, it was agreed that I

would present an exegesis of the Lord's Prayer. Although this took me far afield from my usual world of Islamic Studies, I had sufficient time to consult with a few Mennonite scholars and church leaders in North America, and I had the capacity to consult key books and articles. The resulting paper, I trust, contributed more adequately to the conversation at hand than had my earlier efforts.

I suspect that others presenting in our dialogues have endured similar struggles finding words to bridge the divides between our diverse academic and theological communities of discourse. Dialogue is that halting search for words that will give life to relationships, and the first words are often the most difficult. Here, we must thank those in our respective Mennonite and Shi'i communities who took courage and initiated contact in the 1990s. When I arrived in Toronto for the dialogue in 2002, I encountered a lively conversation already in progress, especially among Mennonite and Shi'i students at the Toronto School of Theology. These relationships were the foundation that enabled others like me to join in on the exchange. By now a wider community of inquiry has emerged through these dialogues, a search for God together and a conversation about how and why we undertake that search differently. This is the great gift that has been given.

In closing I would like to mention a few things that will continue to challenge those involved in these dialogues. There is a strong temptation, on the Mennonite side at least, to instrumentalize the dialogue into a kind of secular peacemaking venture. There is no doubt that these encounters constitute a means to resist powerful political forces that foster animosity between Iran and the United

States and threaten to destroy our common life on this planet. These dialogues speak to our need to do something about the dangerous state of our world. Yet, our justification for dialogue must go beyond this and on to the nurture of relationship and friendship for its own sake, or, in biblical language, on to love of neighbor. The notion that these dialogues are primarily about making peace between nations unnecessarily exposes the process to the danger of hubris and the charges of inefficacy and naïveté.

Beyond this are the theological and ethical differences that lie between us. The obvious differences in political theology will continue to perplex, as will the more subtle divergences in spirituality and philosophical orientation. And it is certainly an irony of God's providence that one of the more pragmatically minded and least theologically developed religious traditions around—I mean the Mennonite—should end up in dialogue with a religious tradition that so highly values medieval logic, metaphysics and philosophical mysticism. It cannot have escaped any of the Mennonite dialogue participants that a sophisticated rationalizing spirituality nourishes several of our Shi'i counterparts, and I continue to puzzle over how best to engage this. Perhaps God is beckoning Mennonites to stretch beyond the modern and post-modern critical paradigms that dominate the North American academy and seriously engage a new theological horizon. I pray that Mennonites will be up to the task.

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## Book Notes

**Chad M. Bauman**, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion in Hindu India, 1868–1947*. Eerdmans, 2008.

**Roger Epp**, *We are All Treaty People: Prairie Essays*. University of Alberta Press, 2008.

**Timothy J. Geddert**, *All Right Now: Finding Consensus on Ethical Questions*. Herald, 2008.

**Ted Grimsrud** and Mark Thiessen Nation. *Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality*. Herald, 2008.

**Walter Klaassen** and **William Klassen**, *Marpeck: A Life of Dissent and Conformity*. Herald, 2008.

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# Demonization and Dialogue

By Thomas Finger

Early in his bid for the Democratic nomination, Barack Obama expressed his openness, if elected, to meeting with Iran's President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Although Presidents Nixon, Reagan and Bush senior had conversed with their international arch-foes, Obama's remark unleashed a fire-storm of protest, and he kept modifying it during his campaign.

This September Ahmadinejad did meet with some Americans—with religious leaders at an event in New York sponsored in part by Mennonite Central Committee. But some American leaders refused to attend. One of them cited Ahmadinejad's "hateful language," including his "denying the Holocaust and apparently calling for Israel to be 'wiped off the map'." He insisted that "peacemakers must know when to say No!" to this "provocative, belligerent rhetoric."

This religious leader was not Pat Robertson, but the National Council of Churches' General Secretary, Michael Kinnamon. I have served on the NCC Faith & Order Commission for 25 years, and I have known and liked Michael all that time. (We even share a secret affliction. Michael is a rabid Cub's fan. I was raised near Chicago, and predestined to be a Cub fan, though I struggle against my fate. The Cubbies have inflicted much mutual suffering on us!) I do not relish questioning Michael. But since his remarks clearly frame the issue I want to address, I will go ahead.

My thesis is that nations will not willingly go to war unless their (alleged) enemies are demonized by those who want war. Nations will not risk the enormous casualties, expense and destruction of war unless their (alleged) enemies are portrayed as absolutely evil, and they and their cause as absolutely good. Demonization can extend to depicting (alleged) enemies as too evil to even speak with, and their intentions as so reprehensible that there is no point asking them what they really think. Such a strategy suits a foreign policy that seeks to isolate its foes and sever relations with them.

Though I am no scholar of Iranian affairs, recent conversations with Iranians have persuaded me that most of what we hear about them is very biased. I hardly mean to endorse everything they or their President say. But, I submit, hardly any North Americans *really know* what they say. And if we recognize how "belligerent" US "rhetoric" against Iran is, we can hardly deny Iranians opportunities to respond from their own perspective. Dialogue with them, of course, could swirl around and around and seem to get nowhere. But if North American Christians abandon dialogue, I fear that Iranian relations will be dominated even more by forces of demonization.

I want to draw on my experience, slim though it may seem, to propose that continuing dialogue, though it will hardly solve everything, can still counter demonization and momentum towards war.

In August of 2006 I found myself, quite unexpectedly, speaking at a Conference on the Mahdi in Tehran. The Mahdi is a savior figure whom many Muslims expect to appear at history's end to establish worldwide justice and peace. Expectation of the Mahdi runs especially high among Shi'ite Muslims, and Iran is the world's only Shi'a governed nation. Though most Christians are unaware of it, the Mahdi is expected to appear with Jesus. Because of this, the organizers of this very Islamic Conference wanted several Christians to speak on Jesus' coming. They contacted MCC, which has enjoyed cordial relationships with many Shi'a leaders ever since its relief efforts after Iran's devastating 1990 earthquake. MCC asked David Shenk of Eastern Mennonite Missions, Gerald Shenk of Eastern Mennonite University, and, perhaps because they couldn't find a third Shenk, they asked me.

David Shenk knew some professors in Qom, Iran, Shi'a Islam's effective world capital today (at the Ayatollah Khomeini Institute—what images might that name conjure up for North Americans?) The Institute dispatched a driver to fetch the three of us from Tehran, two hours away; he spent eight hours on the road that day. We toured the Institute library, which included an impressive section on Christian theology. We visited a related organization which was translating many reputable books on Christianity into Farsi.

Back in Tehran, Ahmadinejad himself was the main speaker at the Mahdism Conference. I was asked—very surprisingly—to go first among the invited presenters. I treated Jews favorably and mentioned some important differences between Christians and Muslims. Though many in the large audience heard my address through Arabic or Farsi translation, I feel confident that these were accurate, since two Iranian journals soon printed it without alteration.

During this Conference, the two Shenks and I were frequently interviewed for television and radio. We didn't need to veil our views of Christianity or Iranian-American relations, because these were the main questions.

A year later (August, 2007) I spoke at the next Mahdism Conference and remained in Iran 10 days. I was continually discussing both issues, with Shi'a leaders, who are close to government leaders, and in many more interviews, this time including films. Most interviewers were 20- or 30-somethings. They often pro-

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longed these discussions beyond the scheduled time, and shared their views with me as well.

The Iranians I met felt acutely that the West caricatures them badly. They seemed desperate to have us understand what they really think. Reciprocally, they wanted to know what I really thought on many subjects, including my faith and the international situation. Many of them had probably never heard an American speak on such things.

I hope my experience at least questions the stereotype of Iranians, including their religious leaders, as rigidly nationalistic and dogmatic, and closed to real dialogue.

To be sure, I was operating on an unusual scholarly, intellectual level. Discussion may not be so unhindered everywhere in this Islamic Republic, including for the small minority of Christians. Possibly, the government was using me to create the impression of intellectual and religious freedom. But why, then, were my discussions so lengthy, and my partners apparently so curious and sincere? Why was I free to say whatever I wished? Why were so many Christian books being translated into Farsi, and so many in various languages available at the Khomeini Institute?

Let me now turn to Ahmadinejad himself. In May 2006, not long before the two Shenks and I visited Iran, Ahmadinejad sent an open letter to US President Bush, who ignored it. However, the three of us thought the letter raised some important points. At the Mahdism Conference, Ahmadinejad was surprisingly accessible. David Shenk asked him whether he might appreciate some dialogue on these points with American religious leaders. The Iranian President mentioned that he would soon visit the United Nations in New York. Several days later his office asked MCC to set up such a meeting.

In New York, about 40 of us met with Ahmadinejad and expressed a deep desire to resolve all tensions between our countries peacefully. But he was pressed on his attitudes towards Israel, the Holocaust and nuclear development. I know of no other American group which met with Ahmadinejad on that visit and treated him respectfully. As we left his hotel, busloads of Jewish school children were surrounding it with protest signs. Reporters questioned Ahmadinejad pointedly several times. When he answered lucidly with a smile, some of them accused him of laughing at them.

When Ahmadinejad addressed the UN, he was preceded by President Bush and then Venezuelan President Chavez. Chavez complained that the chamber smelt of sulfur, because the devil had just spoken. That day, TV news often positioned Ahmadinejad's picture next to Chavez's, and called him Chavez's "Iranian counterpart." But Ahmadinejad never spoke like he did.

At the end of our meeting, Ahmadinejad had invited a delegation to visit Iran in February 2007. During that visit, the delegation of 13 spoke with him and former President Khatami for two and a half hours. This was the first American delegation of any kind to meet with an active Iranian President since 1979!

Ahmadinejad again visited the UN in September 2007, and was invited to speak at Columbia University. But no less than Columbia's President introduced him as "a petty and cruel dictator," (*Columbia News*, Sept. 24, 2007 [[www.columbia.edu/cu/news/07/09/lcopeningremarks.html](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/07/09/lcopeningremarks.html)]) and he was treated more rudely than the year before. This time Ahmadinejad met with about 140 US religious leaders. They again raised

tough questions, (see the words of Ron Fleming, MCC International Program Director, at [www.mcc.org/iran/meetings2007/comments.html](http://www.mcc.org/iran/meetings2007/comments.html)), but received him courteously and stressed their desire for peaceful solutions.

By that time I had heard Ahmadinejad discuss the tough issues and outline his broader perspective in his own words four times—quite rare for an American. I hardly agreed with all that he said. But he threw some light on the most common criticisms of him. Western media repeatedly claim that Ahmadinejad wants to destroy Israel and denies the Holocaust. How accurate are these two claims?

Regarding Israel, Ahmadinejad used a Farsi expression routinely but questionably translated as “wipe off the map.” It is clear to me that he means removing the name “Israel” from literal maps, as has happened with “USSR.” Ahmadinejad has often advocated a political solution, not a military one, for Israel/Palestine, though the Western press hardly ever mentions this. (See Peter Tatchell, “Ahmadinejad accepts Israel’s Right to Exist,” at [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/sep/29/iran.israel.ahmadinejad](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/sep/29/iran.israel.ahmadinejad)).

Further, I heard Ahmadinejad discuss the Holocaust often, but never deny it. He seemed, rather, to assume that something awful happened to Jews during World War II. His aim, he said, was to challenge some conclusions which are automatically drawn from this. Why, he asked, was the Palestinians’ land taken? If Europeans persecuted Jews—for centuries—why wasn’t European land appropriated?

Nevertheless, neither he nor his government, to my knowledge, have unambiguously refuted these two crucial charges. Why do they allow these lurid impressions of anti-Semitism to stand? As far as I can see, because they want to win anti-Semitic support, especially among Arabs.

Here I must register total disagreement. The Holocaust was a monstrous atrocity. No nation can allow anything like it to happen again. If its horror is minimized or ignored, and if alertness to such possibilities diminishes, such things may well happen again. The Holocaust was a calculated attempt at genocide. If words which can plausibly sound genocidal circulate without critique, resistance against another such atrocity can be weakened, and the ground for it prepared.

What, then, should Christians do when Ahmadinejad or others downplay the Holocaust and malign Israel? We have two basic choices. We can simply denounce them or write them off, and, actively or passively, further the demonization of Iran. Or we can listen (or read) carefully enough to find out what they really mean; and if we still object strongly at points we can tell them that in various ways—if possible, to their face. All three New York meetings have done this with Ahmadinejad.

Ahmadinejad, of course, can sound hateful and belligerent. But he lacks the means to carry out major threats. The Bush administration, however, threatens to attack Iran at least weekly. American vessels, some with nuclear arms, have cruised the Persian Gulf, and naval exercises have been conducted there. Iran’s military budget is just over 1% of the United States’. (According to the Military Spending chart at [www.globalissues.org/Geopolitics/ArmsTrade/spending.asp](http://www.globalissues.org/Geopolitics/ArmsTrade/spending.asp) [accessed on June 12, 2008] the US annual military budget is \$711 billion [48.28% of world total], while Iran’s is \$7.2 billion. [China’s annual budget is \$121.9 billion; Russia’s, \$70; the UK’s \$55.4, and France’s, \$54]). The US invaded its next-door neighbor, Iraq, over five years ago and still has around 120,000 troops there. If you were living in Iran, with no nuclear weapons and its current military budget, whom would you consider most belligerent?

Moreover, three nearby countries—India, Pakistan and Israel—have acquired nuclear weapons. Iran has not. Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. These three nations did not. And the US now plans to supply India with nuclear fuel. To be sure, Iran sometimes hides information from the Atomic Energy Commission. But Iran often permits inspections. This is a main reason why we know so much about its nuclear enrichment, though our media seldom make this clear.

Most North Americans suppose that the UN should punish Iran’s evasions. But who are the UN Security Council’s permanent members? The nuclear club. The US deploys about 950 strategic nuclear weapons; Russia, about 750; France and China, about 130 each; and the UK about 50 ([www.reachingcriticalwill.org/about/pubs/Inventory07.html](http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/about/pubs/Inventory07.html) [accessed June 12, 2008]). None of these are seriously reducing their arsenals. If you were Iranian, would you consider the UN an unbiased forum for resolving proliferation issues? And what countries would appear belligerent to you?

As further evidence of Iran’s violent intentions, the Bush administration accuses it of providing weapons and fighters to its foes in Iraq, and to Hamas in Lebanon. Such charges are extremely difficult to evaluate. But some are probably true. Yet let us also ask: how many weapons and soldiers does the US have in Iraq? How much military support does it supply to Israel?

I do not favor Iranian support of Hamas or of Iraqi fighters. I hope that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons. But when we compare Iran’s military activities and capacities with the United States’, and yet focus on Iran’s “belligerence,” something is wildly out of proportion. Demonization greatly magnifies the specks in the Other’s eyes and blinds us to the enormous logs in our own.

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