

Missiological Reflections for Christian-Muslim Engagement

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When I was asked to present some “missiological reflections for Christian-Muslim engagement” at the annual meeting of the Council of International Anabaptist Ministries (CIM), I accepted the assignment with a fair amount of trepidation. I knew there would be much accumulated knowledge and wisdom at the gathering about how to conceptualize Christian-Muslim engagement in missiological terms, about how Christian-Muslim encounter is, through God’s grace, part of God’s mission to reconcile all things to God, and about how the church is called to be part of that mission. My anxiety was compounded as I began to dig through Mennonite Central Committee’s (MCC) archives in preparation for this talk, reading up on how MCC has thought about and depicted its role in Christian-Muslim engagement over the past decades and in the process reacquainting myself with the extensive inter-Anabaptist conversations that have already taken place about Christian-Muslim engagement. What new word could I possibly offer to this conversation? My concerns about this assignment started to abate, however, once I decided not to try to say anything original, but rather to try to distill some of the learnings that keep resurfacing over the decades of Anabaptist reflection on Muslim-Christian encounter.

Digging into the archives reminded me that inter-Anabaptist consultations about Christian-Muslim encounter has been going for over fifty years.² Here’s a brief, undoubtedly incomplete overview: At the Kitchener Conference in Ontario in 1962, MCC, Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM), and Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities came together to consider the future of Mennonite institutional outreach to Muslims. One year

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² For a more detailed discussion of these consultations, see Loren Diller Lybarger, “Defining Presence: The Formation of Mennonite Agency Approaches and Attitudes toward Muslims and Islam, 1949–1995,” study document submitted to Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Board of Missions, and Eastern Mennonite Missions, Chicago, September 1995.

later MCC, along with Mennonite Brethren and Brethren in Christ mission agencies, convened the Jordan Mission Investigation. Two decades later, in the 1980s, MCC, MBM, and the Eastern Board initiated the Mennonite Middle East Study Project, which commissioned a study by LeRoy Friesen about the missiological approaches of Mennonite agencies in the Middle East.³ (One can observe parenthetically here that these inter-Anabaptist consultations on Christian-Muslim engagement tended to be Middle East-focused.) In 1991, CIM hosted a consultation under the title, “The Gospel and Islam.” And then in 2003, Eastern Mennonite Missions, Mennonite Mission Network, and Eastern Mennonite Seminary organized the conference, “An Anabaptist Consultation on Islam: The Church Meets the Muslim Community,” from which emerged a weighty study of over 500 pages.⁴

This is only to name formal inter-Anabaptist consultations, not even touching on studies carried out internally by individual institutions, or the writings of people like David Shenk, or the series of Shi’a-Mennonite theological dialogues that MCC helped initiate, in partnership with other Mennonite institutions. Needless to say, any serious accounting of this long history of inter-Anabaptist discussions of how to engage Muslims is impossible in this whirlwind overview, and the chances of me saying something novel that wasn’t touched on by these previous consultations is slim. Accordingly, I will simply seek to pull out recurring themes and trends that emerge from this history of inter-Anabaptist missiological reflection, trusting that these might prove illuminating for present practice.

A review of previous Mennonite consultations about Islam reveals that there have been multiple Mennonite missiologies of Christian-Muslim engagement. Sociologist Loren Lybarger, in his study of Mennonite institutional engagement with Muslims, highlights two main missiological approaches that developed beginning in the 1970s. Some organizations have held up as a primary missiological objective in Christian-Muslim engagement “the creation of fellowships of Muslim converts,” with mission workers placed in tentmaking assignments. For other organizations, the primary emphasis in Christian-Muslim engagement has been on “cooperative endeavors and justice advocacy.”⁵

Earlier, relief and service tended to be depicted as preparatory to proselytizing efforts: not the mission itself, but as paving the way for the heart of mission.

3 LeRoy Friesen, *Mennonite Witness in the Middle East: A Missiological Introduction* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1992).

4 See James Krabill, David Shenk, and Linford Stutzman, eds., *Anabaptists Meeting Muslims: A Calling for Presence in the Way of Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005).

5 Lybarger, “Defining Presence,” 107.

And so, for example, MCC Executive Secretary Orie Miller in the early 1960s lamented the fact that MCC's work on the West and East banks of Jordan had not resulted in the creation of church fellowships.⁶

However, beginning in the 1970s some Mennonites active in predominantly Muslim contexts began to re-conceptualize relief, service, development, and advocacy as themselves mission. For instance, in 1971 MCC Canada leader Frank Epp asserted that “the works of relief” are not “simply a way of getting the foot in the door for the words of the Gospel. On the contrary, the works are themselves the good Word, provided they are based on, are informed by, arise from, and flow to the King and His kingdom.”⁷ As this missiological approach developed, concerns were frequently expressed about word and deed being separated, concerns that an affirmation of relief, development, and justice advocacy as valid forms of mission in themselves would lead to a separation of action from the verbal sharing of one's faith commitments. In response to this worry, leaders within both MCC and the mission agencies insisted that the two missiological approaches—the one focused on the creation of fellowships of new believers and the other consisting of practical acts of service—were not necessarily in irreducible opposition to one another and suggested that framing the missiological question about the relationship of “word and deed” was potentially misleading. MCC leader Urbane Peachey, for example, contended in 1984 that “the real question is not ‘word and deed.’ The real question is, What is the message? The real question is whether we care enough about the message and its eternal author to examine the barriers that distort and shut out the message.”⁸

A frank assessment of the programs operated by CIM members today in various contexts would, I am confident, uncover multiple missiological approaches at play, some of them in tension with each other. What we learn from the history of inter-Anabaptist consultations regarding Christian-Muslim encounter is that there has been an ongoing commitment by Anabaptist mission agencies to keep these multiple missiologies in creative tension with one another.

One refrain that surfaces repeatedly in the records of previous consultations is the limitation placed on Christian-Muslim engagement by the

6 Cited in Lybarger, “Defining Presence,” 65.

7 Frank Epp, “The Mennonite Presence in the Middle East: Its Length, Its Breadth, and Its Depth,” (presentation, MCC Annual General Meeting, Chicago, IL, January 22–23, 1971, released by MCC News Service, January 29, 1971) 7.

8 Urbane Peachey, “A Summary of MCC Experience in Islamic Societies,” in *A Reader on Islam: A Sample of MCC Experience*, compiled by Urbane Peachey, July 1984, 18. Available in the MCC archives in Akron, PA.

limited language skills possessed by Mennonite mission workers. So, for example, in the 1970s MCC administrator Urbane Peachey observed that “in most cases, MCC personnel do not possess the language facility to get into very deep discussions on serious questions.”⁹ A decade earlier, Orié Miller noted that the relatively short-term (three-year) nature of MCC service assignments meant that most MCC workers could obtain only a limited competency in the local language.¹⁰ Such limitations, of course, are common to most intercultural assignments, whether in predominantly Muslim contexts or not. Yet Mennonite consultations about Christian-Muslim engagement have routinely also noted that certain types of theological engagement with Islam requires not only being conversant in the local language spoken by one’s Muslim neighbors, but also an ability to read the classical Arabic of the Qur’an and Islamic religious texts of *hadith*, *fiqh*, and the like, and obtaining such ability requires years of focused study. Very few Mennonite workers have obtained such facility: Jon and Jacqueline Hoover, Roy Hange, and Merlin Swartz come to mind.

As I reflect on this recurring refrain about the language limitations of Mennonite workers, a few missiological implications for Christian-Muslim engagement come to mind. First, an awareness of our linguistic limitations should lead to humility and to refraining from any pretense that we know in some essential sense what Islam is: at best, most of us can only aspire to know enough to know that there is much complexity and depth we do not know. An epistemological humility that flows from an awareness of our cultural-linguistic limitations should make us suspicious of the claims that fill the public sphere about what Islam truly is or isn’t. Second, this humility shouldn’t lead us to throw up our hands in despair about our ability to undertake Christian-Muslim engagement. We can befriend Muslims, undertake joint disaster response initiatives with Muslims, promote peacebuilding projects with Muslims, share our faith with Muslims in action, answer questions Muslims might have about our convictions with whatever limited Arabic, Farsi, Bahasa, or other language skills we might have. An awareness of our cultural-linguistic limitations positions us as learners in these engagements, turning to our Muslim neighbors, friends, and partners as teachers.

A related learning from the archives is that, at their best, Mennonites have become suspicious of essentializing accounts of Islam. Again, this suspicion developed over time. An MCC manual for the Teachers Abroad Program from the early 1970s betrays an Orientalist approach of depicting Islam in broad generalizations, linking such broad generalizations to apologetic purposes,

9 Urbane Peachey, “Understanding Islamic Societies,” 3.

10 Cited in Lybarger, “Defining Presence,” 65.

such as depicting Islam as a religion of unthinking obedience in contrast to Christianity presented as a religion of free response that energizes humanity's rational faculty. Such Orientalist, essentializing depictions of Islam are deeply suspect, especially when they flow from self-serving apologetic purposes for demonstrating Christianity's superiority. Yet the temptation to succumb to essentialist accounts of Islam remains strong. So, for example, in an article published at the beginning of this century, leading Mennonite missiologist Wilbert Shenk built on the work of the political theorist Samuel Huntington, famous for his "clash of civilizations" thesis, to argue that the church is called to bridge civilizations that Huntington expects to be increasingly in conflict with one another.¹¹ Shenk's vision of the church as a bridging community is alluring, yet his insufficiently critical treatment of Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis is problematic, in that that thesis assumes a static, homogeneous essence to Islam, and in that it reduces complex conflicts into religious ones, failing to give an adequate account of the ethnic, economic, and political dimensions to those conflicts.

Loren Lybarger correctly counsels that "Mennonites need to guard against homogenizing generalizations" of Islam and Muslims, paying attention to the complex diversity of Islamic traditions and Muslim communities and recognizing the fluid nature of religious traditions and expressions.¹² Homogenizing essentialisms should be rejected because they fail to attend to the complex, shifting particularities of the Muslim communities with which we engage and the traditions they inhabit. Put in more explicitly theological terms: awareness of our cultural-linguistic limitations serves as a reminder that we are creatures, that we are not God, that we should not conflate our knowledge with God's knowledge, and that because God's Spirit moves where it will, we should expect to have our fixed preconceptions of who Muslims are and what Islam is challenged, modified, and potentially upended through patient encounter with Muslims.

Another learning from the archives is how Mennonite agencies came to embrace dialogue as an integral part of Christian-Muslim engagement. Bertha Beachy, a long-time Mennonite worker in Somalia, wrote in 1978 that Christians working in predominantly Muslim contexts need to adopt the stance of being "eternal learners" and to "participate into the rhythm of people's lives."¹³ This emphasis on the missiological importance of a learning posture, one of

11 Wilbert Shenk, "Christian Mission and the Coming 'Clash of Civilizations,'" *Missiology* 28, no. 3 (July 2000), 291–304.

12 Lybarger, "Defining Presence," 120.

13 Bertha Beachy, "Culture Shock in an Islamic Society," in MCC TAP Orientation, Akron, PA (August 19, 1978), IX-12-7, MCC archives, Akron, PA.

expectant openness to how God is at work among Muslims whom we have had the privilege of coming to know as colleagues, neighbors, and friends, becomes increasingly prominent starting in the 1970s. Many start calling this learning posture the “dialogue of life,” distinguishing the mutual sharing that takes place between Mennonite workers and their Muslim neighbors from more formal, academic dialogues. To be sure, some Mennonites have engaged in more formal dialogues with Muslim theologians—David Shenk’s conversations with Baderu Katerrega of course come immediately to mind, as do the Mennonite-Shi’a Muslim dialogues that emerged from MCC connections in Iran.¹⁴ Yet the emphasis on the “dialogue of life” one finds in the archives reflects the conviction that Christian-Muslim engagement should not be limited to formal encounters, but should encompass the daily sharing of salt and bread with one another.

We also learn from our history of inter-Anabaptist conversations about Christian-Muslim engagement that a learning posture does not preclude sharing our faith with Muslims; rather, we see a recognition that in the dialogue of life Christians and Muslims share their faith convictions with one another in embodied witness. Mennonite administrators did occasionally worry that the new emphasis on a learning posture in Christian-Muslim engagement (which in turn reflected broader missiological and development shifts) would lead to Mennonite workers being silent about their faith. So, for example, in 1994 MCC administrator Paul Myers wondered if MCC’s development philosophy of “listen, learn, and do not impose solutions” sometimes led MCC workers to avoid sharing deep faith concerns with Muslims, or even to a lazy pluralism that relativizes all truth claims and embodies its own form of imperialism.¹⁵

14 See David Shenk and Badru Katerega, *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*, 2d ed. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011). Several papers from the various Mennonite-Shi’a Muslim consultations have been published: papers from the first consultation on “The Challenge of Modernity” appeared in *Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2003); papers from the second consultation on “Revelation and Authority” can be found in *Conrad Grebel Review* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2006); papers from the third dialogue were published as *On Spirituality: Essays from Third Shi’i Muslim Mennonite Christian Dialogue*, ed. M. Darrol Bryant, Susan Kennel Harrison, and A. James Reimer (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2010); essays from the fourth dialogue appeared in *Peace and Justice: Essays from the Fourth Shi’i Muslim Mennonite Christian Dialogue*, ed. Harry Huebner and Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen (Winnipeg, MB: CMU Press, 2011); and papers from the fifth dialogue were published as *On Being Human: Essays from the Fifth Shi’i Muslim Mennonite Christian Dialogue*, ed. Harry Huebner and Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen (Winnipeg, MB: CMU Press, 2013).

15 Paul Myers interview conducted by Loren Lybarger, November 4, 1994, cited in Lybarger, “Defining Presence,” 71.

Yet Mennonite experience with Christian-Muslim engagement reveals that this worry has proven unfounded. Speaking personally, on the streets of Gaza or in the guest rooms of homes in Palestinian refugee camps, I found it impossible to be silent about my faith, simply because Muslim friends, acquaintances, and partner representatives wanted to know why I was a Christian and why I was not a Muslim. Often they would express the fervent hope that I would one day become a Muslim, and their caring questions to me demanded from me that I give an account of the hope within me. It's dangerous, of course, to extrapolate from personal experience, but I doubt that my experience in this regard is unique. Indeed, Gordon Epp-Fransen, MCC's current co-Representative for Jordan, Iran, and Iraq, shares a similar experience, reflecting after a recent MCC delegation to Iran that "time after time we had opportunity to share our motivation as followers of Christ, to build peace and share the love and teachings of Christ to our neighbors. In return, we were provided significant insight into the teachings of Islam, particularly on teachings of how they relate to other faiths and on peacemaking."¹⁶ Be it through the dialogue of life or through more formal dialogue encounters we have discovered that a posture of learning can and should go hand in hand with deep rootedness in Scripture, tradition, and worship, and with a readiness to share one's faith. In fact, we have learned that the lack of such rootedness can be cause for suspicion. So, for instance, former MCC worker in Iraq Peter Dula observed that Muslim friends working for MCC partner organizations would tell him that they trusted him, because he was a Christian and willing and able to talk about his faith, whereas they expressed suspicion of and concerns about their European aid colleagues who were self-professed agnostics.

Another learning emerging from inter-Anabaptist conversations about Christian-Muslim engagement is that such engagement requires a reckoning on the part of Anabaptists from Canada and the United States of how Christianity in the West has been closely intertwined with the West's colonial projects. Now, we should readily confess that Mennonite missiological discourse has at times unthinkingly reflected colonial vocabulary and assumptions. Reviewing material from inter-Anabaptist consultations in the 1960s, for example, one is struck by language of "targeting" specific Muslim populations or of the "penetration of the Gospel" within Islamic societies. Beginning in the 1970s, however, such vocabulary begins to recede as Mennonite mission agencies increasingly started to assert that the integrity of Christian witness required a disavowal of empire and a disentangling of Christianity from Western

¹⁶ Quoted in Cheryl Zehr Walker, "Building Understanding in Iran," MCC News Service, (March 7, 2014).

colonialism. This has persisted as an enduring theme in Mennonite reflection on Christian-Muslim engagement for the past forty years, and is arguably more important than ever in the wake of the Global War on Terror, US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and drone warfare. Yet we have also learned that disavowing empire is easier said than done. MCC worker John A. Lapp in 1979 asked, “what is the difference between the missionary-imperial link and the service worker-Western culture link?” in recognition of the challenges facing Anabaptist agencies from the US and Canada in separating their Christian witness from Western culture.¹⁷ We might claim identities as resident aliens or exiles in empire, but we have also learned that colonial habits die hard.

This enduring challenge of unlearning colonial habits bring me to a final point of learning from the history of inter-Anabaptist consultation on Christian-Muslim engagement. Specifically, the growing recognition that in order to have depth and integrity, efforts by Anabaptist agencies to engage Muslims must be done in consultation and collaboration with the churches in the majority Muslim contexts in which our agencies operate. Mennonite agencies have sometimes exhibited impatience with these churches. Sometimes we viewed them as being insufficiently spiritual and too ritualistic and tradition-bound. Sometimes we lamented that they evinced minimal interest in the Mennonite peace position. Sometimes we considered these churches to be too insular, and sometimes we viewed them as too aligned to the state. This impatience would at times lead Mennonite agencies to try to create some distance between themselves and the local churches.

We convinced ourselves that we had strong missiological reasons for working for this distance. So, for example, during the civil war in Lebanon, MCC worked deliberately to position itself as an intersectarian organization, not aligned with any of the factions in the conflict that was tearing apart the country. MCC Lebanon workers worried that partnering too closely with churches would hinder MCC’s ability to work with all Lebanese communities, and often viewed the Lebanese churches as insular. MCC Lebanon worker Ralph Miller reported in 1979 that MCC workers routinely heard from Lebanese Christians that “Christian aid should be for Christians” (a refrain other MCC programs heard in other parts of the Middle East and around the world).¹⁸ Miller and his MCC colleagues insisted, following good humanitarian principles of non-partiality, that emergency and development assistance should be distributed according to need, and they believed that adhering to those principles required,

¹⁷ John A. Lapp, “Is There a Resurgent Islam?” (June 1979), IX-12-6, MCC archives, Akron, PA.

¹⁸ Ralph Miller, “Lebanon: Summary of Problems and Issues,” April 1979, in “Lebanon 1975–1979” file, IX-12-7, MCC archives, Akron, PA.

while not separation, at least some institutional distance, from the Lebanese churches.

However valid the different reasons our agencies had for at times wanting some institutional distance from local churches were, we also came over time to insist on the importance of accompanying those churches. Lybarger observes that the CIM consultation in 1991 on “The Gospel and Islam” demonstrated not only “an openness to hearing Muslim perspectives,” but just as importantly “a sensitivity to the experiences and concerns of minority Christian communities living in predominantly Islamic contexts.”¹⁹ We came to recognize the danger of replicating colonial patterns if we separated ourselves from the local church either institutionally or attitudinally. As free church Christians, we developed an appreciation for the centuries-old liturgies and traditions of Coptic Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox churches and realized that adopting a learning stance toward Muslim neighbors, friends, and partners demanded that we adopt a similar learning stance toward the Christian communities who had preceded us.

Most importantly, we slowly started learning to decenter ourselves, to free ourselves of the illusion that American and Canadian Christians are at the center of God’s mission. We learned that a missiology of Christian-Muslim engagement should not be primarily focused on how our US and Canadian organizations are engaging Muslims in places like Egypt, Syria, or Indonesia, but rather on how the church in those contexts and others is engaging its Muslim neighbors, and then secondarily on how our organizations can accompany the church in those contexts. We have witnessed God’s reconciling mission at work as Indonesian Mennonites and Muslims in the Forum for Peace across Religions mobilize to respond to emergency needs and to counter religious extremism. We have witnessed God’s reconciling mission as Orthodox and Protestant bishoprics and congregations in war-torn Syria provide assistance not only to their own members, but also to their Muslim neighbors. We have witnessed God’s reconciling mission as Muslims have protected churches in Deir Attieh in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt. We have witnessed God’s reconciling mission as the Orthodox and Catholic churches in the Gaza Strip opened their doors to Muslim neighbors driven from their homes by Israel’s bombardment of Gaza this past summer, telling them, “if your mosques are destroyed, raise the call to prayer from our churches.” We have no illusions that Christian-Muslim relations in these and other contexts are untroubled, and we are painfully aware of the increasingly precarious witness of the church in some of these contexts. Yet we also rejoice in how the church maintains its

19 Lybarger, “Defining Presence,” 93–94.

witness even in precarious contexts, engaging Muslim neighbors and joining with Muslims in rejecting forces that would drive them apart. As we think together about the future of Christian-Muslim engagement, let us stay focused on how we can accompany the church in such contexts as it participates in God's reconciling mission and on how we can support Muslims and Christians who testify to God's reconciling work by refusing to be enemies.