Challenges of Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Jacqueline Hoover

Christian-Muslim dialogue comes with a wide range of challenges and pitfalls. This brief article will not attempt to catalogue them comprehensively. It will instead relate two stories of Anabaptist-Mennonite interaction and dialogue with Islam and Muslims—one story from the sixteenth century and the other from the early twenty-first century. My aim in presenting these thoughts in the context of the Murid-Anabaptist dialogue is to help us all more deeply appreciate the fact that dialogue always takes place within a sociopolitical context and to encourage Mennonites to reflect on their own history of engagement with Islam.

Two Stories of Christian-Muslim Dialogue

1. Christians Weaponizing Islam Against Christian Enemies in the Sixteenth Century

The first story takes us to early sixteenth-century Europe, the period when Anabaptism emerged. This was a turbulent period. The Reformation caused numerous troubles, religious and political. Various peasant uprisings against the elites brought much upheaval and destruction.

Beyond these internal conflicts, Europe was also threatened by external forces. In the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Turks were advancing into Europe from the southeast. The Ottomans were Muslims, but Christians in Europe simply referred to them as Turks. The Christian rulers of the day called for armed resistance against the Turks. This, of course, conflicted with the pacifist convictions of some Anabaptists.

One of these Anabaptists was Michael Sattler, formerly a Catholic monk. The Christian rulers of Austria arrested Sattler on several charges, one of which was his opposition to fighting the Turks. In 1527, Sattler was charged with saying, "If the Turk were to come into the land, one should not resist him, and, if it were

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right to wage war, he would rather go to war against the Christians than against the Turks."[1] Sattler did not deny the charge and responded further, "If the Turk comes, he should not be resisted, for it stands written: You shall not kill."[2] He rejected military action against the Turks just as Muslim armies were invading Europe, and he was eventually martyred for his beliefs in 1527.

While we can appreciate Sattler's courage, he could perhaps have been a bit more moderate. Sattler distinguished between two groups: (1) Muslims or Turks who had never heard of the Christian faith and (2) Christians who knew about Christ but still persecuted fellow Christians. Sattler saw this second group as "Turks according to the spirit."[3] In other words, Sattler discredited his Christian persecutors by calling them Turks. For him the biggest threat to the Anabaptists were his Christian neighbors, not the Muslim invaders. So, he insulted his near enemy, the persecuting Christians, by branding them with the name of their far enemy, the Turks. Sattler's pacifism rooted in the example of Christ informed his courage, but it did not temper his language.

Sattler was not the only Christian against fighting the Turks. The famous reformer Martin Luther (d. 1546), a former monk as well, was also against fighting them. However, Luther's reasoning was rooted in God's wrath and not the example of Christ. Luther argued that it was futile to fight the Muslim invaders because God was using the Turks to punish European Christians for their sins. Fighting the Turks would be useless because it would be opposing God's will. Even when the Ottoman Turks were on the verge of invading German-speaking Europe, Luther argued that it would be better to repent and pray to God to relent rather than fight the Turks.[4]

Like Sattler, Luther also used Islam to bash his Christian enemies. His objective was pastoral. He wished for Christians to repent from their sins, and he wanted to encourage faith, especially among Christians who lived under Ottoman domination, so they would stay faithful and not convert to Islam. In contrast to this, some of the early Anabaptists thought living under Ottoman Muslim dominance would give them more liberty to live out their vision of the faith. They believed that Ottoman Muslim tolerance toward non-Muslim minorities was greater than European Christian tolerance toward Anabaptist Christians.

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1 As quoted in Jon Hoover, "An Anabaptist Perspective on Conversing with Muslims," in *Evangelical, Ecumenical, and Anabaptist Missiologies in Conversation: Essays in Honor of Wilbert R. Shenk,* eds. James R. Krabill, Walter Sawatsky, and Charles E. Van Engen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 120–29, 287–88 (120). See also Astrid von Schlachta, *Anabaptists: From the Reformation to the 21st Century* (Kitchner, ON: Pandora, 2024), 98–101.

2 Quoted in Hoover, "An Anabaptist Perspective," 120.

3 Quoted in Hoover, "An Anabaptist Perspective," 121.

4 John V. Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 105.

However, underlining the greater intolerance in Europe and describing the situation of minorities in enemy territory as better was an unwise political choice.[5]

Luther did eventually change his mind and start to advocate for war against the Turks after 1529.[6] That was the year the Ottomans first besieged the city of Vienna. He also later developed a sharp polemic against Islam. However, his polemics against Catholicism and especially the Pope were much stronger. He often compared the Pope with the Turks, and he famously said, "Compared to the Pope, Muhammad appears before the world as a pure saint."[7] So, the near enemy—the Pope—was actually worse than the far enemy—the Turks.

We see that for both Sattler and Luther the biggest threat to their faith was internal, from within the church and not from outside, and comparisons with Islam were used to discredit Christian adversaries. This was not becoming of their Christian witness, even if Muslims were probably not around to hear it.

Sattler and Luther's habits of mind can be hard to shed. There is a little Sattler in all of us. The challenge is to avoid resorting to comparative and rhetorical referencing of Islam in our criticism of fellow Christians. Muslims do notice how Mennonites talk about them when speaking about other Christians. I think here of the challenge in John 13:35: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."[8] We do need to critique the colonialist past and our complicity in the various types of nationalism that are so widespread in Christian churches, including the Mennonite Church. But we should avoid using stereotypes about Muslims and Islam to make our arguments.

2. Mennonite-Iranian Shi'i Dialogue After 9/11

The second story involves North American Mennonites engaging with Iranian Shi'i Muslims. It was spurred by the big earthquake in Iran in 1990.

After the earthquake, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) reached out to offer relief to Iran. Out of this emerged an exchange program between MCC and the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute (IKERI) in Qom, Iran. This exchange sent a few North American Mennonite students to Iran and a few Iranian Shi'i students to Canada.

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5 Gary K. Waite, "Menno and Muhammad: Anabaptists and Mennonites Reconsider Islam, 1525–1657," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 41, no. 4 (2010): 995–1016, 1000–1002.

6 Hoover, "An Anabaptist Perspective," 121; Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad,* 105; Waite, "Menno and Muhammad," 1000. Luther in his 1529 book *On War Against the Turks* justified military resistance against the Turks. Yet, he still believed that repentance and prayer would be a better way to resist them.

7 Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 84.

8 All quotations from the Bible are from the *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*.

Beginning in 2002, after US President George Bush added Iran to the "axis of evil" following the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, North American Mennonite scholars engaged in a series of dialogues with Shi'i scholars linked to IKERI. There were other exchanges as well. MCC director Ed Martin noted, "While MCC's work around the world relates primarily to relief and development, it also places priority on peacemaking," and he interpreted these exchanges between people of different religions in the tense international political context as peacemaking.[9] It is about talking to people on the other side of the fence in times of hostility. For Martin, this needs to be done with transparency, respect, patience, perseverance, and openness to the direction of the Holy Spirit, which Martin interprets as vision that responds to new opportunities.[10] Mennonites were very interested in the idea of opening a new path in a context of political tension.

However, the dialogues between scholars evoked concern among the Iranian diaspora in North America. Representing this diaspora, Mahdi Tourage wrote a critique of the Mennonite engagement with Iran and especially the IKERI. He noted that the founder of IKERI, Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi (d. 2021), was extremely conservative and authoritarian and supported violence against whoever was not in agreement with him. Tourage also accused the founder of supporting suicide missions—of not only deeming them permissible but sometimes necessary. Additionally, he charged Mesbah-Yazdi with supporting Islamic slavery and suggested that he may have been influenced by Nazi ideology.[11]

Tourage stated that he was not opposed to dialogue in itself, even with an organization like the IKERI, but he deplored the absence of all critical reflection in Mennonite writings about these dialogues. He would have liked Mennonites to address with their Iranian partners during the dialogues what he saw as IKERI's hateful support of human rights violations.[12] He emphasized that he was not allowed to participate in the dialogues and that the Iranian diaspora protesters were not permitted to express themselves during the visit of the Iranian delegation to Canada in 2007.[13] In brief, he stated that a "fetishization of dialogue and a commodification of peacemaking took place between the MCC and

9 A. James Reimer, "Shi'i Muslims and Mennonite Christians in Dialogue: Two Religious Minority Groups Face the Challenges of Modernity," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 3 (2003): 3–14, 4.

10 Ed Martin, "Mennonite Engagement with Iran," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 31, no. 1 (2014): 131–39, 139.

11 Mahdi Tourage, "Fetishizing Dialogue and Commodifying Peacemaking," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 26, no. 1 (2009): 136–52, 137–40.

12 Tourage, "Fetishizing Dialogue," 140.

13 Tourage, "Fetishizing Dialogue," 142.

IKERI," resulting in a certain justification of violence.[14] He argued that dialogue should not be an end in itself and should always include introspection.[15]

This short mention of the Mennonite-Iranian Shi'i dialogue does not do justice to all parties involved, but Tourage's critique is a salutary reminder that dialogue is always embedded in webs of political power and subject to abuse and exploitation by the various parties. It is essential to be aware of vulnerabilities to manipulation. Nonetheless, dialogue is very important for keeping open lines of communication and doors to friendship in the midst of tense religious and political differences, even if not everyone can be accommodated at the same time.

Dialoguing with Humility

The two stories above refer to very different time periods. Yet in both cases the Anabaptist-Mennonite responses to Muslims are courageous and attempt to take Jesus's words seriously—to love God wholeheartedly, and even to love the enemy. They illustrate as well that loving the neighbor can be very challenging. In the story of Sattler, the neighbors were the Christian authorities who persecuted the Anabaptists. In the story of the North American Mennonite-Iranian Shi'i dialogue, the neighbors were the Iranian diaspora in North America who had suffered at the hands of the Iranian regime and the ideologies flowing from the IKERI, the very organisation that Mennonites were in dialogue with. Moreover, as we saw in the first example, there is always the temptation to refer to the Muslim other, who seems farther away, in order to discredit the much closer Christian neighbor.

Dialogue does not come without pitfalls. Given that even the best efforts might fall short and leave space for critique, all dialogue must be undertaken with humility. This reminds of us Micah 6:8 (NRSVUE): "He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

14 Tourage, "Fetishizing Dialogue," 136.

15 Tourage, "Fetishizing Dialogue," 146–47.