



Interfaith Relations Newsletter

Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana
Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations

Faith-Based Diplomacy: Talking with Iran

Do religious leaders have a role in today's diplomacy? At a time when religion plays an increasingly critical role in political disputes and violence around the world, foreign policy experts seem eager to use a process that has come to be known as Track II Diplomacy. Indeed, it was a career Foreign Service Officer, Joseph Montville who proposed this idea, back in 1980. Policy statements by presidents and other government officials (Track I) are frequently hamstrung, limited by formalities and complex posturing, he said. They "cannot risk the chance that adversaries will misperceive reasonableness as a sign of weakness." Track II, on the other hand, is "an unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations that aims to develop strategies, influence public opinion, and organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict."

When US Americans think about Iran the first images that come to mind are those from the 1979 US embassy hostage crisis. Those images flashed before us on our television screens every night for some 444 days. We did not take kindly to Ayatollah Khomeini who called America "the great Satan" or the other Ayatollahs and we looked upon their religious fervor with fear and disdain. Most Americans have had an adversarial relationship with Iran ever since.



To Ayatollah M.A. Taskhiri, I presented an oil lamp on behalf of the delegation, symbolizing our commitment to remember him and Iran in our prayers. On the right is Rev. Ron Flaming (MCC) who led the delegation on behalf of the Mennonites.

When Iranians think about the US, the first image that comes to their mind is from 1953, when the CIA and British intelligence overthrew Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. In his stead, they placed the Shah. Iranians recall how this US backed dictator oppressed them for 25 years, until in a popular rebellion inspired by religious fervor; the people overthrew the Shah and instituted an Islamic Republic.

How do you negotiate between such competing narratives? This is where skills of interfaith dialogue can play a helpful role, for in interfaith dialogue we are confronted in addition, with competing truth claims and alternative centers of power

and allegiance. Over the years, through painstaking relationship building we have learned to navigate between those polarities and get to the underlying sources of conflict.

I was one of 13 US Christian leaders who visited Iran in February. Organized and led by the Mennonite Central Committee, who have 17 years of experience in Iran and the American Friends Service Committee, our primary task was to cut through the confrontational rhetoric coming out of both Washington and Tehran and create opportunities for people to people dialogues where Americans and Iranians can listen to each others' stories and grasp each others' pain. To this end, we sought the partnership of religious leaders — Muslim Ayatollahs and Christian clergy — including the Armenian Orthodox Archbishop. We found the Ayatollahs we met to be learned men who enjoy significant public support and authority. As religious leaders, we found in them colleagues with whom we could engage in the task of finding common ground.

In Iran's political structure, the president does not have nearly as much power as the American president does in the US. For instance, in matters pertaining to military actions, foreign policy and nuclear issues, authority lies with the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In addition, those who run for President or for membership in parliament (majlis) must be approved by the Supreme Leader. This past December's mid-term elections handed the President's party a significant defeat, and in January the Supreme Leader gave a rare public criticism of the President and his inflammatory rhetoric.

Mr. Ahmadinejad too comes across as a religious man. He based his remarks on Qur'anic scripture and seemed to acquiesce to the authority of religious leaders. We asked him several questions. I will remark on two: on uranium enrichment that might lead to the development of nuclear weapons, and on the Holocaust conference and his remarks on Israel.

"We are against war and the production of WMDs, chemical, biological and atomic bombs" said President Ahmadinejad. "This is what our religion tells us. Iran is a religious government."
Continued... p.2

Continued from p. 1

He reminded us that the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has issued a *fatwa* against the manufacture or use of nuclear weapons. Iran's uranium enrichment program is strictly for energy, he said, and is needed for Iran's 20 year long economic development plan. "As a signatory to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran has every right to develop nuclear energy under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)," he said. It is also true," he continued, "that today, nuclear weapons are not effective. Nuclear weapons did not help the Soviet Union to survive. They could not help Mr. Bush in his war with Iraq," he said.

I raised the question of the Holocaust and Israel. "Mr. President, you were quoted in the US media as saying Israel must be wiped off the map. I want to know if you really said that, and if so, what did you mean? Also, following earlier comments you made denying the reality of the Holocaust, you held a conference in Tehran in December that questioned one of the most horrible events in human history." I asserted that his views, rhetoric and actions at the very least, undercut our attempts to build relationships between the people of the United States and Iran.

Mr. Ahmadinejad reiterated that he does not deny the reality of the Holocaust. He believes that its disastrous effects are exaggerated to provide legitimacy for the state of Israel. "Why should Palestinians suffer for the anti-Semitism of Europeans?" he asked. He questioned why the event should not be studied, giving a place to all opinions. "Why do you permit questions on the very existence of God, but not about the existence of the Holocaust?" he asked.

He also reminded us that the way he seeks to resolve the question of Palestinians is by holding a plebiscite of all the people who live in the area. I remarked that this proposal is a non-starter, since it would indeed be a way to wipe Israel off the map. He indicated that he would be open to other political solutions but was firmly against any military options.

I summarized the churches' positions on Israel/Palestine, emphasizing our commitment for justice for Palestinians and peace and security for Israel. I pointedly disagreed with him on the Holocaust conference, asserting that this horrendous event in human history has been the subject of significant study. "Israel is a reality; it's not going away" I insisted, "If we are to take you seriously, you must begin to deal with that reality."

While there was much to disagree with, the meeting provided us with three encouraging items: a clear declaration

that Iran does not intend to acquire nuclear weapons; a statement that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be resolved militarily, but only by political means and a willingness to talk with US government officials if there is good will.



The delegation met with President Ahmadinejad for two and half hours.

While the meeting with the president was the most high profile meeting we had, the meetings with religious leaders are, in the long run, far more significant. These leaders—from both countries—are the ones skilled in navigating through the competing narratives each side brings to the table, and can, in the end, facilitate relationships between Iranians and Americans. Committed to working towards such a goal, the delegation called upon both the US and Iranian governments to immediately engage in direct, face-to-face talks, cease using language that defines the other using "enemy" images, and promote more people to people exchanges including religious leaders, members of parliament/congress and civil society.

Perhaps most significantly, the delegation discovered on the streets of Tehran ordinary human beings, who like us, live ordinary, normal lives. In the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Evangelical (Presbyterian) Church, and in many mosques, we met mothers, fathers and children all created in the image of God. They, like us, desire peace. We also met many religious leaders, who, like us, are willing to stand in the gap. Therein lies our hope.

For more information:

<http://www.nccinterfaith.blogspot.com>

<http://www.irandelegation.org>

<http://www.nccusa.org>

Season of Prayer Website

At this time of heightened tensions with Iran, we are re-launching our Season of Prayer website, a valuable resource of prayers, scripture texts, litanies, hymns and songs from a variety of religious traditions. We are encouraging religious communities to use these resources in their own religious observances as well as in joint events of witness for peace they may conduct in their local communities. The website will also be a bulletin board to announce events that would take place in local communities. We also encourage people to send new and creative material that can be used by others for publication in this website.

Created during last year's Israel-Hizbollah war, the website is endorsed by major religious leaders and has so far received over 225,000 visitors. Website address is : <http://www.seasonofprayer.org>

At the Interfaith Relations Commission Meeting....

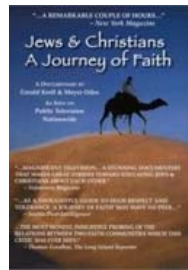
Two Excellent Videos



The Interfaith Relations Commission meeting this February in Arlington, VA, watched excerpts of two videos: "Three Faiths, One God" and "Jews and Christians: A Journey of Faith." These were presented by producers Jerry Krell and Merv Odze.

They then engaged in a panel discussion with Rabbi Marc Gopin (Director, Religion, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution Center at George Mason University), Imam Yahya Hendi (Chaplain, Georgetown University), both of whom are featured in the video, and Bob McLaughlin (representing the Bahai Faith). The Commission recommended their use as excellent resources for interfaith education.

You may purchase these videos and accompanying study guides for personal viewing or with public viewing rights. For more information please go to www.nccusa.org/interfaith/ifrhome.html



Peace Building, Religious Freedom and Interfaith Relations

We also welcomed guests from Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peace: Ruth Zimmerman (Director) and Dr. Earl Zimmerman, and from the First Freedom Council of Richmond, VA, Dr. Isabelle Kinnard. Following short presentations introducing their organizations we moved to a panel discussion on "Peace building, Religious Freedom and Interfaith Relations."

The peace studies program at Eastern Mennonite University offers courses in justice, trauma recovery, development, organizational skills, and conflict resolution. Since 1994, it has produced more than 200 graduates and has trained over 1000 people in peace-building. One of its graduates, now a diplomat at the Foreign Ministry in Tehran, was instrumental in arranging the meeting with President Ahmadinejad in September 2006 in New York and the Christian delegation to Iran this February.

"We are building on our radical peace heritage," said Earl Zimmerman who teaches at EMU. Our strategy includes reflective praxis in development work and non-violent conflict resolution skills. Coming out of our own history we give special attention to the powerless and the marginalized. Rather than begin with one's own correct position, which is by definition sectarian, we try to appreciate the perspective of "the other." Yet we are grounded in the moral claims of Jesus. Recognizing that imaginative models will rarely emerge from the top levels of society, we build from the ground up. Analyzing the society's processes we try to relate them to the politics of Jesus. Thus we can be hospitable to others while maintaining our own core identity. This is the essential component of peace-building and community formation.

"Forced religion stinks in the nostrils of God," said Isabelle Kinnard, quoting Roger Williams. Religious freedom is the foundation upon which peace building and interfaith relations stand. The core question for us is not that we disagree, but how to deal with disagreement with civility and respect, she said. The Council for America's First Freedom watches religious freedom issues around the world.

Religious Leaders' Bi-lateral Dialogue Tables

Jewish — Christian: This dialogue table that has functioned for three years stalled for a variety of reasons, including staff changes at several Jewish organizations. We are working on re-starting this dialogue.

Muslim — Christian: Christian partners are in conversation with Muslim colleagues about starting a similar table. We have had initial conversations and hope to create such a table later this year.

Buddhist — Christian: This is a new initiative. The Commissioners expressed particular desire to initiate conversation with Theravada Buddhist colleagues. It is particularly pertinent in the context of the on-going violence and inter-religious tensions in Sri Lanka, they said.

Task Group on Christian Zionism

The Commission responded to a request by NCC president Michael Livingston to help appoint a Task Group to study Christian Zionism and apocalyptic theology and suggest an ecumenical response. The NCC Governing Board approved such a request by the Interfaith Relations Commission last year.

The Task Group will begin its work in May, by defining its task and by engaging in theological consultations with Christian and Jewish experts. They hope to bring an interim report to the Governing Board of the NCC later this year.

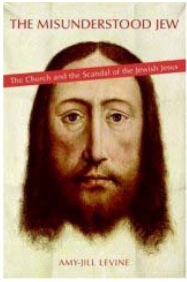
Consultation on Jamestown Missiology

The Commission in partnership with the Virginia Council of Churches and Regent University will sponsor a consultation on missiology in the spring of 2008. This continues the partnership we began with Evangelical theologians on interfaith issues at Fuller Theological Seminary last year. It also follows from the concerns we raised about the 400th anniversary of the Jamestown settlement. Recalling how the impact of the missiologies of that day led to atrocities particularly against Native American people, the consultation will focus on the need for a missiology for today, with particular emphasis on Native Americans.

This will be an invitational consultation, limited to presenters and representatives of churches and NCC member communions. Following the consultation it's material will be available for wider dissemination.

Resources for Interfaith Relations

The Misunderstood Jew: the Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus Amy Jill Levine (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006)



A Jewish scholar who teaches New Testament to primarily Protestant students at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Amy-Jill Levine is in a unique position to address the meaning of Jesus, the “Jewish prophet” for our time.

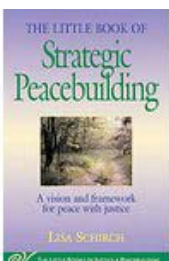
Expanding our understanding of the cultural and religious context of Jesus’ life and teaching, Levine paints a picture of the culture in which Jesus grew up, including diet and dress of first century Palestine, Jewish holidays and customs, the numerous public roles of Jewish women and the rituals of the temple. Many of the difficult sayings of Jesus that have puzzled Bible readers for generations suddenly make sense in the light of his Jewish heritage.

This is a necessary book for Christians, particularly for preachers and teachers. Christians have a history of stereotyping Judaism, for instance as legalistic, purity-obsessed, Temple-dominated, xenophobic, violent, greedy, and misogynist. Every time we separate Jesus from his context we run the risk of promoting anti-Judaism. I see Levine’s challenge as a call for a deeper and more genuine Christianity.

For the same reason, it is also an important book for Christian ecumenical organizations, publishing houses, and Liberation and Post Colonial theologians. While these institutions have stood against bigotry of all types, as Levine admits, often unintentional anti-Judaic bias in their statements and theologies has gone unrecognized. I see in Levine’s challenge to them as well, a call for a deeper and more genuine Christianity.

The Christian institutions she identifies will continue to challenge contemporary Judaism’s tendency to uncritically support policies of the State of Israel that are unjust towards Palestinians. Anti-Judaic bias is not necessary for such criticism to be legitimate. Unbiased criticisms will be easier for Jews to receive, and their self-critical examination will yield opportunities for a deeper and more genuine Jewish faith. Such is the result of authentic interfaith dialogue.

The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding Lisa Schirch (Good Books, 2004)



With the same diligent preparations that have gone into waging war, peacebuilders now use strategic planning to build the architecture for peaceful and just communities.

Lisa Schirch sets forth incisive strategies for pursuing peace with justice, including long-term planning, working at all levels of society, careful decision-making, and coordinating different actors and approaches to peace-building. This is a tool-kit that captures the complexity of the tasks and provides a comprehensible decision-making and planning guide.

Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus Stephen J. Patterson (Augsburg/Fortress Press: 2004)



“One of the great mistakes of Christian theology has been our attempt to understand the death and resurrection of Jesus apart from his life,” writes Patterson who teaches New Testament at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis. The gospels portray his death only as a consequence of his life.

When Jesus came into Galilee he announced that the empire of God was at hand. The *Pax Romana*, the established empire, maintained itself through violence. It was politically, economically and socially structured as a pyramid of patronage, the wealthy and powerful at the top and the poor and dispossessed at the bottom, held together by “loyalty, piety and Roman family values.” The empire of God, on the other hand, was structured horizontally, where all people are equally welcome, including expendable people like fishermen, prostitutes, lepers, beggars, the sick and the disabled. Soon, the empire of God was seen as subversive of the empire of Caesar.

A victim of the empire, Jesus was executed for sedition. Christians must completely get rid of our inclination to say that Jews killed Jesus, including in our passion week liturgies — not only because of our history of anti-semitism but for our own theological consistency. Patterson asserts that those in Pilate’s yard who shouted “crucify him” were a different crowd than those who followed him into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Those “Jews” were not allowed in Pilate’s yard. Those who shouted “crucify him,” were a mob organized by the Empire’s operatives.

How do you find meaning in such a death? Three early Christian understandings of the death of Jesus: as “Victim,” as “Martyr,” and as “Sacrifice” are examined, helping us understand what these words would have meant at the time of Jesus. “His death matters...” says Patterson, “because his life had mattered to them. They spoke of his death in ways that affirmed his life, and reaffirmed their own commitment to the values and vision stamped into his life by his words and deeds.”



Contact Us...

Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana
Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations

National Council of Churches USA
475 Riverside Drive #880, New York, NY 10115
Phone: 212-870-2560 Fax: 212-870-2817

E-mail: shanta@nccusa.org
Blogging at: www.nccinterfaith.blogspot.com
www.nccusa.org/interfaith