

# **Mission as Reconciliation in the Pluralistic Contexts**

## ***The Praxis of Reconciliation***

(Not for Publication Without Consultation with the Writer)

David W. Shenk

Early in 2007 we were hosted in the *Hizbullah*<sup>1</sup> command center in Solo, Central Java. We were an international group of about thirty Christians. Armed militia in military uniforms escorted us into their center. We sat on the floor in a large circle, the Hizbullah on one side and the Christians on the other. Our hosts introduced themselves, “We are Hizbullah, and our mission is to kill our enemies, and fight to defend Islam!”

A few months earlier I had heard a similar exhortation from a leading North American evangelical leader. “The only way to deal with the Muslim terrorists is to kill them!” he elaborated on a Christian radio talk-show. The Christian preacher was counseling disciples of Jesus to vote for the most militant candidates in an upcoming election.

There was convergence between the North American Christian radio speaker and these Indonesian Muslim militants. It seems to me that both sidestep the astonishing Gospel proclamation that Christ crucified is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1: 22-25)! Both commitments nourish the wrath of nations. However, the theme of this presentation is the praxis of bearing witness to the reconciling power of Christ crucified in our pluralist world, and especially in contexts of opposition or conflict or where reconciliation seems to be an unrealistic hope or even a goal that is disparaged.

Jesus also lived in an exceedingly conflictual time. Nevertheless, recall that in one of his resurrection appearances Jesus met the disciples and showed them the wounds in his hands and

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<sup>1</sup> Hizbullah means “Party of God.”

side and proclaimed, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. . . . Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:21-22).

### **Indonesia: Peacemaking Within a Hizbullah Context**

This calling to live and proclaim the peace of Christ is beyond human capability; it demands the fullness of the Holy Spirit and an unencumbered commitment to Jesus Christ. An example is the Christian engagement with Hizbullah<sup>2</sup> in Central Java, that I have already alluded to. This movement comprises 10,000 militia, who have burned churches and have been violent against Christians. Local realities might contribute to the violence, but global geo-politics are equally pertinent. When a church burning has been planned, occasionally signs have been posted pointing in the direction of the church to be destroyed with this word: Israel. The simple village churches of Indonesia bear no responsibility for the conflict in the Middle East. Yet they are caught in the recoil of those Muslims who believe that the world-wide Muslim nation should join in the struggle for liberation of the Palestinian people, and who feel that the church, especially in the West, is opposed to that liberation struggle.

So it is both global and local realities that define the mission of the Hizbullah in Indonesia. Solo is the command center of the Hizbullah of Central Java. For 600 years Solo has been the meeting place of Indonesian cultures and religions. It is a place of both intercommunity peace and occasional conflict. In 1998 much of the center of the city was gutted in conflict between the Chinese and Javanese, Christians and Muslims, business interests and proletariat. This conflict sent shock-waves throughout Indonesia, for if there is no peace in Solo, there could be no peace in Indonesia. Consequently leaders of religious communities formed an inter-religious peacemaking committee, who gave leadership to trust-building.

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<sup>2</sup> Hizbullah in Indonesia is not the same organization as the Shi'ite Hizbullah in Lebanon. The term means those who strive in the way of God.

Five years ago the committee invited my wife and me to meet with Muslim and Christian leaders in the central mosque to break the fast in a Ramadan evening. They asked for counsel on peace-making; I told them of a dialogue I had written with a Muslim, Badru Kateregga, which some Muslim-Christian peacemaking dialogue groups find helpful.<sup>3</sup> They decided to translate and publish that book jointly. Our meeting with the Hizbullah was part of the book launching events planned by the peace-making committee.

The book is only one dimension of the reconciliation movement. Paulus Hartono, who in his youth led prayers in a mosque, is now the Christian leader of the reconciliation movement. He builds upon cultivating good relations with the moderate peace-inclined Muslims. He believes that the distrust between communities is so deep that the most fruitful witness of Christ is the praxis of the way of Christ. Verbal witness is most fruitful when given in response to questions that come in response to the praxis of reconciliation.

Paulus uses the platform of trustful relations with moderates to engage the militants. His first visit to the Hizbullah was four years ago. The commander greeted him gruffly, “You are a Christian and infidel and therefore I can kill you!” Unfazed Paulus returned again and again to the commander’s center to drink tea and converse.

Then Paulus invited the commander and his officers to fly with several Christian leaders to Banda Aceh to work with Christian teams in the post-tsunami reconstruction. Prior to the tsunami Banda Aceh had acquired notoriety as a center for Islamic militant fervency. However, much of the reconstruction efforts have been Christian philanthropy. Remarkably the Hizbullah leaders accepted, and for two weeks worked with the Christian teams in rebuilding projects. The commander slept in the same room with Paulus. They became friends! One evening around the evening meal, the commander began to weep. He said, “When I think of what we have done to

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<sup>3</sup> Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk, *A Muslim and A Christian in Dialogue*, (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1997).

you, and how you reciprocate with love, my heart has melted within me!” He confided to pastor Paulus, “I have discovered that you Christians are good infidels.”

The launching of *Dialogue* was within this context of energetic peacemaking engagement with Islamic militancy. The launching had two venues. First was an assembly of eighty peace-committed Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Zoroastrian, and Christian leaders. M. Dian Nafi, a Muslim imam who had written one of the forewords, spoke of the significance of the Conflict Transformation program at Eastern Mennonite University as helping to form his understandings of peacemaking in a pluralistic world: you confess your faith clearly, but respect the right of the other person to disagree. Then I spoke on Christian peacemaking centered in the cross.

At the time for questions, a young woman stood at the back and asked, “If Jesus reveals love for the enemy, why did your Christian president go to war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and why do Christians in America support him?”

I responded, “A characteristic of nations throughout history is that they occasionally go to war, and civilizations are sometimes in violent conflict. But that is not the universal kingdom of Jesus the Messiah, and it is that kingdom that I represent. Nations rise and fall, but the Messiah calls us into a kingdom of peace and reconciliation that is eternal. There is much diversity in the Christian church in North America, just as there is diversity among the Muslims of Indonesia. Christians struggle about how to be responsible citizens of their nations while being committed to the kingdom of God that is centered upon Jesus the Messiah. As for the Christian community that I represent, we sent a letter with 7,000 signatures on it to the President urging him not to go to war. While the war goes on Christian Peacemaking Teams have also been serving seeking to build bridges of reconciliation within Iraq. One of these peacemakers has been kidnapped by a

militant faction and he has laid down his life for the Gospel of reconciliation that he was practically demonstrating with his team mates. ”

This book launch and my comments on Christ-centered peacemaking were broadcast on national television and well received by the Muslim communities. From there we went to the Hizbullah command center for the second book launching. After the Hizbullah explained that their mission is to kill their enemies, I responded, “However, when you kill your enemies, you have more enemies. Jesus the Messiah reveals an astonishing different way. He commands us to love our enemies, forgive them, and even lay down our lives for the enemy! In that case you do not have an enemy!”

They were astounded! Then Pastor Paulus gave the commander a copy of *Dialogue*. He broke down. Paulus was sitting beside him and placed his arm around the shoulders of this big man, who had been responsible for violence against Christians. When he regained his composure, he said, “I am weeping for this book is revealing another way, the way of peacefully sharing faith instead of violently confronting one another.” He requested 50 copies of *Dialogue* for all his officers.

I asked Paulus how he explains this transformation. He said, “Lots of cups of tea -----and the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Hizbullah commander is now calling Christians, “My infidel friends!” Remarkably the transformation of the Hizbullah means that church and Hizbullah in some circumstances join hands together to work for the peace; in fact the commander has even advocated for the churches in requests for permits for church construction.

As a next step in reconciliation, the Christian leadership in Solo working with Hizbullah is now developing relations with *Jamaah Islamiah*, a terrorist group engaged in such atrocities as the Bali bombings. The commitment of the Christian leadership is to build bridges, first with

moderate Muslims, who open the door to the militant Muslims, who open the door to the terrorists. The prayer and plan is to salt the leadership centers of terrorist Islam with the fruit of the reconciling Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What about evangelism? Paulus says, “My calling is to bear witness, mostly through praxis, to the reconciling love of Christ. I give account of my faith in Jesus to all who ask; conversion is not my responsibility; that is the work of God.” Remarkably his church has grown from 40 to 250 in the last dozen years, and with the advocacy of Hizbullah, they are planning to build a second church in Solo.

This is a lovely account of faithful intentionality in peacemaking and reconciliation in the way of Jesus within an arena of profound distrust and amidst the ashes of violence. It is noteworthy that the Christian leadership intentionally woo peace-loving Muslims as their companions in the peacemaking overtures to militant Islam. The efforts are permeated with prayer. Even at the pacific book launching, several led out in prayer, both Muslim and Christian. There is keen awareness that in the conflict between Muslims and Christians, only the intervention and blessing of the God of Abraham can bring forth peace between adversarial communities.

But the challenges are daunting. In one of my visits to Indonesia I learned that Muslim militants in a village community had ordered the church to close and wanted Christians to move out of the community. This in a village where Christians and Muslims had lived together for a century! It was outside Wahabist influences that were instigating the confrontation. I was in a meeting where tears flowed as pastors wept before the Lord in intercessory prayer. Then the pastors initiated an unobtrusive series of trust-building meetings with a wide spectrum of community and religious leaders. Finally the church was allowed to reopen.

### **Algeria: Redemptive Suffering**

Sometimes peacemaking demands laying down ones life. Jesus said that the greatest human love is to die for ones friend. But Jesus reveals a new command; to follow his example and lay down ones life for the enemy (John 13:34; 15:13)! That is the witness of the Trappist monks of Tibhirine, Algeria, as described by John Kiser, in his book, *The Monks of Tibhirine, Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria*. The book narrates the pilgrimage of the prior, Christian de Cherge<sup>7</sup>. As a young man, Christian served as a military officer in the mid-1950's fighting against the National Liberation Front in its war for independence from France. He led one of the village based teams commissioned to rebuild trust after French war planes had bombed thousands of villages and displaced 2.6 million people.

An Algerian Muslim, Muhammad, was Christian's associate. He was devoutly Muslim, and nurtured the quite secularist Christian into faith in God. During an ambush to kill Christian, Muhammad intervened by stepping between Christian and the assailants, and thereby saved Christian's life. Subsequently the freedom fighters executed Muhammad in retaliation for his non-violent intervention.<sup>4</sup>

Thereafter Christian felt indebted to Algerians as represented in Muhammad, a Muslim Algerian who led him into faith in God and who had saved his life. He therefore left the military, and became a Trappist monk, who eventually joined a small monastery in the mountains sixty miles from Algiers. The mission of this community was the "powerlessness" of love, prayer, presence, and service in a context where the Muslims of Algeria had experienced the often arrogant, condescending, violent face of "Christian" France. These Trappist monks

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<sup>4</sup> John W. Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine, Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002), 6-21.

discovered that they had much in common with the Sufi mystics, who believed, “He who thinks about God constantly ... can be neither arrogant nor violent.”<sup>5</sup>

The independence struggle (1954-62) and then the subsequent revolution (1988-94) devastated Algeria, as the country struggled to resolve the tensions between western and Islamic values that permeated their societies. The struggle descended into hell in 1992 when the secularist establishment annulled elections won by the Islamic Salvation Front. To identify with any side was the kiss of death, as was the case if one did not identify. The monks sought to glorify Jesus and his kingdom, within the mayhem. It seemed increasingly likely that the monks may be martyred. They chose to stay.

Christian proclaimed, “If redemption is the motive for the coming of Christ, then Incarnation is the method.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore they could not abandon their calling to incarnational presence within a milieu where all sides in the conflict searched the Qur’an for justification for their engagement in violence. As the cancer of violence spread through the society several nuns and monks were killed in different locations.

The youngest to die was Christian Chessel, who wrote just prior to his death, “Our mission in the Muslim world is marked by weakness....To be weak is to be neither passive nor resigned; rather, it supposes courage and pushes us to struggle for justice and truth while resisting the elusive seduction of force and power.”<sup>7</sup>

Martyrdom was not in the vocabulary of the Trappist Order, only faithfulness so that God may be glorified.<sup>8</sup> March 27, 1996, the monks at Tibhirine were also kidnapped, and shortly thereafter killed. This sacrifice unto God, and for the Algerian people, transformed the nation.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 218

The violent wing of the Islamic Salvation Front began to unravel, partly through resignations of over a thousand militants appalled at what had transpired. Hugh Johnson, a Methodist pastor for many years in Algeria, comments, “I think the killing of the monks was a turning point....People were affected not only by the way they lived, but also by the way they died.”<sup>9</sup>

Kiser comments, “In retrospect, there were many signs that the monks’ death had indeed been a turning point. For a country that seemed drunk on violence, their assassination in God’s name was, for many Algerians, like hitting rock bottom. It was the final and highly publicized insult to an already-abused Islam.”<sup>10</sup> It could also be said that it was an insult to a secular establishment that was not amenable to the cries for justice across the country. In September that year, Algeria had a peace referendum. Eighty-five percent of the eligible voters turned out, with 98% approval of clemency and forgiveness and reconciliation. The foundations were being laid for a more civil Algerian society.

### **Israel/Palestine: Salt and Light**

Eastward across the Mediterranean from Algeria, the Palestinian *Intifada* (rising) has also been “salted” by Christian presence. A Palestinian, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, describes Palestinian society as “Islamicate,” wherein Islamic values dominate, but Christian presence helps to cultivate a pluralist and peace-making ethos.<sup>11</sup>

One such voice is that of Bishara Awad, president of the Bethlehem Bible College. Bishara’s father was killed in cross-fire in the war of 1948 when the State of Israel was formed. Neighbors helped the family bury him in a shallow grave in their courtyard without even a grave marker. Immediately thereafter the family had to flee into the old city of Jerusalem. His mother

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 2003), 164-65.

could not support her seven children, so they were put into orphanages. It was terribly hard; never enough food. Yet in his monthly visits to his mother, she urged, “Always show the Lord to everybody. It is never right to take revenge.”<sup>12</sup>

Within the cycles of violence and retribution that strangle the political peace processes, the Bethlehem Bible College equips emerging Palestinian leaders to follow the counsel of Bishara’s mother to follow the Lord and never take revenge. Complementing the mission of the College is *Musalaha*,<sup>13</sup> led by Salim Munayer. This is a reconciliation movement among Palestinian and Jewish followers of the Way. One of the forums for reconciliation is desert camel safaris with these teenage followers of Jesus Christ. They ride the camels on their desert trek, make camp, pray, argue, study the Bible, and seek to know what it means to be followers of Jesus amidst the injustice and violence that afflicts their societies. These safaris are transformational; the Jewish and Arab young people return to their communities committed to salting their context with the reconciling love of Jesus Christ.

Reconciliation must begin within the fellowship of believers in Christ; yet there is also the calling to transform society. “You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world!” Jesus announced in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:13,14). In that spirit Bishara Awad’s brother, Mubarak, established the Center for the Study of Nonviolence in Jerusalem, and reached beyond the Christian communities in cultivating these commitments. Noteworthy was publishing in Arabic the account of Abdul Ghaffar Khan who led an Islamic non-violent movement in Pakistan against British colonialism in the 1930’s. The center distributed this book in Palestinian villages throughout Palestine.<sup>14</sup> In due course Mubarak’s non-violent approach

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<sup>12</sup> Brother Andrew and Al Janssen, *Light Force, The Only Hope for the Middle East*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004), 101.

<sup>13</sup> Musalaha means “coming together” or “reconciliation.”

<sup>14</sup> Abu Nimer, 163.

was perceived to be dangerous indeed by the Israeli political establishment, and his residency visa was terminated. Yet it was voices like that of Mubarak that helped to keep Hamas on a non-violent course in the early years of its confrontation with Israel.<sup>15</sup>

This invitation to a non-violent respectful approach towards the opponent was also directed to the Jewish people. Palestinian Christians tell me that they remind their Jewish compatriots that God provided land for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because they were good neighbors. “Are you good neighbors to the Palestinian people?” is their probing question. The patriarchs found space in the promised land by cultivating good neighborly relations!

The Bethlehem team is committed to the praxis of reconciliation. For example, December 17, 1992, 415 Palestinian Hamas leaders were deported from Gaza and the West Bank to a cold hillside in Lebanon; most were professionals; most were detained for a year. When I visited Bethlehem shortly after their release, Bishara Awad told me of Brother Andrew (known by many as God’s smuggler), who, in partnership with Christians in Lebanon and Palestine, marshaled resources in Holland to take to the stranded Hamas on that hillside. They also visited the families in Palestine bringing letters, news, and pictures.<sup>16</sup> Twelve months later, when the men were released to return home, these Bethlehem Christians wended their way in their Volkswagon through fields avoiding road blocks to get to the Hebron mosque where a grand assembly had gathered to welcome their heroes home.

When the Bethlehem team appeared at the mosque, they were welcomed as brothers who had stood with the Hamas detainees when the whole world seemed to have forgotten their plight. In the meetings that followed in a variety of venues, they were occasionally invited to distribute

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>16</sup> Brother Andrew, 135 – 168.

New Testaments, for the Hamas leaders knew that it was the Jesus of that book who had inspired this network of Christians to minister to them in their extremity.

The church as a people of compassion and reconciliation in the midst of the impasse within Palestine/Israel is salt and light within the conflict. Professor Raymond Bakke has told me that King Hussein of Jordan once told Bakke during a visit in Amman, “Middle Eastern Christians are the glue who hold this region together!” He went on to say that he had bought 5,000 copies of the book, *Blood Brothers*, by Abuna Elias Chacour, who is a Palestinian Bishop in Ibilin, Galilee. The King had distributed these books to his parliament, officials in his government, his family, and Middle Eastern political leaders because the Bishop had presented the message of reconciliation clearly, a message which was the only hope for the peace of the region.

In his book Bishop Chacour describes the destruction of their Christian village in Galilee as the State of Israel was formed. In the midst of their suffering he describes his father’s unshakable insistence that because of Jesus their family must never harbor hate or resentment in their souls; their calling was to forgive.<sup>17</sup> That is what astonished the former King of Jordan, and that is the message he wanted the political leaders throughout the region to hear.

### **Iraq: Reconciling Presence**

Christian Peacemakers Teams have served in Iraq as a reconciling presence. Not large—just a quiet witness for peace and reconciliation. Their ministries were as broad as advocating for refugees needing to flee into Syria to escape sectarian violence to a presence of peace in the destructed city of Faluja, as it sought to rebuild after weeks of street by street fighting had destroyed much of the city. Then on November 26, 2005 all four members of the team in Iraq

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<sup>17</sup> Elias Chacour with David Hazard, *Blood Brothers*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

were kidnapped. For the next 118 days they were at the mercy of their captors until they were finally released. But only three were released; one of them, Tom Fox had been killed.

When the news of the kidnapping of the four spread across the region, an outcry arose calling on the kidnapers to free these servants of God. From Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas of Gaza, the outcry was raised. In refugee camps across the region petitions were signed. Muslim and Christian prayer vigils emerged across the region. From Iraq, to Syria, to Lebanon, to Jordan, to Palestine, to Gaza, the earnest petitions for their release circulated. Their capture was like ripples in a pond after a stone is thrown. Outward in ever widening circles the vigils and petitions circulated. After the release of the three, the ripples continued, for the three who lived issued this statement that was broadcast across the Middle East region.

We unconditionally forgive our captors for abducting and holding us. We have no desire to punish them. Punishment can never restore what was taken from us. What our captors did was wrong. They caused us, our families, and our friends great suffering. Yet we bear no malice towards them and have no wish for retribution.<sup>18</sup>

### **Mindanao: Spirituality for Forgiveness**

This message of forgiveness that heals was also a significant theme in a visit to Mindanao, Philippines, in 2005. Our small team met with Muslim and Christian leaders within this region that has been traumatized in the collision between Islamic insurgency and government repression.

Father Bert Layson observed sadly, “There have been five wars in the years 1997 to 2003. Each of these wars displaced hundreds of thousands with scores of villages destroyed.”

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<sup>18</sup> Tricia Gates Brown, *118 Days: Christian Peacemaker Teams Held Hostage in Iraq*, (Chicago: Christian Peacemaker Teams, 2008), foreword.

Peace missionary Jon Rudy comments, “The violence is not only from these wars. I counted at least six overlapping but discrete layers of conflict that feeds the violence in Mindanao.”

I suppose every person we met had lost at least one loved one or an acquaintance. In two different university settings we met with assemblies comprising Christian and Muslim students as well as faculty. In the discussion there was angry insistence that justice was the only way that peace could ever come to their societies.

I asked, “How can true justice really happen when, as I have heard today, the father of one of you was shot to death in your presence in your living room? How can you ever put that wickedness right? At the end of the day isn’t receiving and giving forgiveness the only way for healing to happen?”

“But where can we find the spiritual resources to receive and give forgiveness?” the students pondered.

In both settings tears flowed as the audience contemplated forgiveness. For both Muslim and Christian students that question nudged them to consider Jesus Christ in whom we receive and extend forgiveness. A couple Muslims commented, “We need help from the church in order to learn of the spiritual foundations of forgiveness.”

In response to such pleas, Dann and Joji Pantoja, a Filipina/Canadian couple, have taken residence in Mindanao with pastoral care as their primary ministry. Muslims and Christians come to their home for the ministry of prayer. They are ambassadors for Jesus, interceding for the peace of Mindanao and ministering in prayer for all who come seeking spiritual resources for the healing of the traumas that have wounded so many.

### **Kosovo: Healing for a Wounded Nation**

Kosovo is another wounded nation. In the wars of ethnic cleansing, Serbs would sometimes kill Kosovari families, burn their homes, and place a cross in the charred ruins. The Kosovari Muslims are also responsible for atrocities against the Serbs. The small evangelical community of about 30 congregations has mostly emerged since the war of 1999, largely because of the compassion and witness of evangelical churches within the refugee camps in nearby countries, especially Albania. Eighty percent of the population are Muslim, 10% Catholic, and 10% Orthodox. There are only several hundred evangelicals. Kosovo is struggling to become a whole nation. Yet destructive bitterness permeates the society like cancer.

That is the context in which I was invited to a public dialogue with a leading Muslim theologian from the university. The theme was peacemaking. The 600-seat hall was packed, with most of the key Muslim and Christian leaders present. My Muslim companion insisted that peace can only come when justice prevails.

Then I commented, “Surely we need to work for justice. However, I suppose every person gathered in this room has lost a loved one in the tragic violence that has wounded this nation. For real healing to happen, don’t we need to receive and give forgiveness?”

“That is unnatural,” my Muslim colleague rejoined. “Where can the supernatural gift of forgiveness be found?”

Throughout the evening our dialogue kept taking us back to Jesus who on the cross absorbs the violence and hate and he forgives. It was an amazing evening. Muslims do not believe that Jesus was crucified, for there is no space in Islamic theology for God who suffers with us, who comes down to save us, or who would absorb human rebellion and violence and yet forgive.

The next day a widely read weekly magazine owned by Muslims interviewed me. The interviewer began, “Because this is a Muslim magazine, I prefer that we not talk about Jesus. So this is my first question. Why are you committed to peacemaking?”

“Because of Jesus,” I responded.

My interviewer was intrigued. The interview went on for over an hour, as she probed the meaning of the cross for healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness. The magazine ran the interview as a center fold double spread article on the forgiveness and reconciliation we have in Jesus! Within days of this development the United Nations convened a meeting of religious leaders to discuss the role of the religions in the future of Kosovo. Subsequently the head of the Islamic community in Kosovo asked to meet the leader of the Evangelical Alliance of churches to explore more about the gift of forgiveness offered in Christ, and to discern ways that the Evangelical churches could participate in healing and nation building.

This is what I observed in Kosovo—Jesus the wounded healer is good news for wounded people and a wounded nation.

### **Iran: Building Bridges through Dialogue**

The message of reconciliation demands not just word—it requires praxis, as Paulus Hartono in Indonesia has so well demonstrated. That has been our experience, likewise, in regard to Iran mentioned in the first presentation. In 1990 there was an earthquake. Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) arranged an airlift of blankets and supplies which were distributed by the Muslim Red Crescent Society. That was the first simple step in trust building. Then during the Gulf War of 1991, MCC airlifted tents for refugees. As trust developed, MCC inquired whether they could move beyond only material aid to an exchange of people, perhaps like the

China Educational Exchange program where church agencies place students and teachers in Chinese universities, and Chinese institutions place people in American church universities.

The Guardian Council reviewed this suggestion and responded favorably, with the surprising request that this be a theological exchange. They would place two doctoral students in a North American university to study western philosophy and Christian theology and MCC would place a couple at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom. That exchange has gone very well. Two students enrolled at the Toronto School of Theology for doctoral studies and MCC appointees have served in Qom.

The first appointees to Qom, Roy and Maren Hange, sometimes had a Bible study with one of the leading professors at the Institute. He was intrigued by Jesus as peace-maker, but perplexed as to how to integrate this with his commitment to Islam. He found John Howard Yoder's, *The Politics of Jesus*,<sup>19</sup> fascinating. The appointees to Qom serve under the overall authority of Ayatollah Mesbahe Yazdi, who is the head of the Institute and a member of the 70-member Council of Experts. He is spiritual advisor to the present President of Iran and a counselor to the Grand Leader.

Subsequently the Institute with the encouragement of the Guardian Council reached for more substantive dialogues with Mennonite theologians. Four such events have happened in the last five years, the last of which was only a couple weeks ago. The first was October, 2002, hosted by the Toronto Mennonite Theological Center. The theme was The Challenge of Modernity.<sup>20</sup> The second event coincided with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Islamic Revolution, with the North American participants as honored guests at the revolution celebrations in Teheran. It was astounding to be seated on the risers with Mullahs and military

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<sup>19</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972).

<sup>20</sup> For a comprehensive review of that event see *Conrad Grebel Review*, Fall, 2003, (Waterloo: Conrad Grebel University College)

officers observing hundreds of thousands gathered to celebrate the anniversary of the revolution. Then we went to Qom where the dialogue convened at the Institute. That was October, 2004. The theme was Revelation, Reason, and Authority.<sup>21</sup> The third dialogue convened at the Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario, May, 2007. The theme was Spirituality.

There was much objection to the May dialogue by a cadre within the Iranian diaspora in Toronto. The objectors insisted that these dialogues seem to legitimize the evils of the Islamic Revolution. The first meeting on May 27 was to be a public event on the theme of dialogue for peacemaking and understanding. The demonstrators entered the hall and objections became a crescendo. As a precaution quite a formidable police contingent had already occupied the quiet campus of pacifist Conrad Grebel College. The demonstrators closed down the public event, so we intermingled with them and engaged in multiple dialogues.

In one exchange, I asked, "Tell me your story."

They told of atrocities and the death of relatives under the regime and concluded, "See these people are wolves!"

I responded, "Jesus calls us to be sheep among wolves, so that the wolves become sheep-like. If we are wolves among wolves, we just destroy one another."

The subsequent "by invitation only" days of dialogue on spirituality went very well, with no further disruptions.

The Iranians from the Institute in Iran are putting much effort into making these engagements truly worthwhile. At the dialogue in Qom I asked why they are inviting us to be engaged in these conversations. They responded, "Because you have no political power and you are a people of peace!"

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<sup>21</sup> For a comprehensive review of that event see *Conrad Grebel Review, Winter, 2006*, (Waterloo: Conrad Grebel University College)

When I asked what could be done to improve relations between the United States and Iran, the responses could be summarized in one sentence: acknowledge and apologize for what you have done to us and respect us.

At the May dialogue I asked my Iranian dinner table companions one evening, “Why are you so committed to these dialogues?”

They responded, “Our director, Ayatollah Mesbahe Yazdi, says these dialogues are important for two reasons. First, our understandings of God are being transformed. Second, if we had been in dialogue earlier we would not be in our present difficulties.”

The previous presentation mentioned the invitation to make a presentation at a conference in Iran on Mahdism. That happened in September, 2006. I have developed my presentation on theology of reconciliation with event as a case study. The dialogues helped to open that door which came through an invitation to Mennonite Central Committee for scholars to participate in the conference on Mahadism, sponsored by the Bright Future Institute of Qom.

I went to Iran early, to meet with church leaders and worship with several of the congregations. I wanted to be sure that I had the blessing of the church for participating in this event. I did indeed receive their blessing!

The conference which convened in Teheran attracted some 4,000 participants for the opening session with President Mahmood Ahmadi-Nejad presenting, and probably 1,500 present throughout. There were 100 guests from abroad, five of whom were Christians. Three of the presentations were from Christians, mine included. So for two days we heard messages on the Mahadist hope that inspires and empowers the Iranian revolution, and three presentations on the Christian hope.

President Mahmood Ahmadi-Nejad opened the conference with a forceful one-hour address. He spoke of Christians in America who, he said, “Go to their churches, but in their lives make the face of Jesus dirty. Our commitment in Iran is to make the dirtied face of Jesus clean again!”

Remarkably after his address I had the opportunity to speak with the President briefly saying, “If there is any way we as church can help to facilitate the dialogue you are inviting with the US administration, let us know.”

He responded, “Thank-you! When I get to the United States shortly I want to meet church leaders.”

At that time there were already several initiatives underway to enable a meeting with church leaders. In the past two years there have been four such meetings; the last meeting this past fall was rather difficult; as so often happens in such events Israel is a stumbling block to finding the way forward. As mentioned in the first presentation, I began my address to the assembly of clerics by referring to President Ahmadi-Nejad’s letter of May, 2006 to President Bush, where he states that both men believe in the second coming of Jesus who will inaugurate God’s kingdom of justice and righteousness.

After my presentation, I was interviewed on Iranian national television. They pressed me on what kind of political structures Christians are developing in order to welcome Jesus rightly when he comes. I assured them that the kingdom of Jesus Christ salts political structures with commitments to peacemaking and reconciliation, but that his kingdom transcends all human political structures. His reconciling kingdom is already happening wherever people meet in the name of Jesus and are committed to his ultimate authority. His Spirit empowers us to live as people of reconciliation.

After the September event in Tehran, I and a colleague met with a couple US State Department officials within the Iran Section. They were astonished that Christians could have serious dialogue within the Iranian theologians. It seemed that they have no such contacts at any level. We pled with them to open the door for conversation. These are dangerous times, and conversations are urgently needed.

### **Pakistan: Theological Engagement**

That same day Dr. Douglas Johnston was addressing a forum within the State Department on faith based diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy. He asserted that Islamic militancy is a not an illusion, and this ideology will never be quelled militarily. It can only be realistically encountered theologically. That is his mission. He engages the militants as a “person of the Book (Bible),” and he is received with respect.

Currently he and his team are investing much energy in Pakistan helping the directors of the militant *madrasas* to rethink and reform their jihadist curriculums. He and his team have invested days of quality time in conversations with key Taliban leaders in Pakistan. They get a hearing. As a person of the Book he and his team participate with the madrasa leaders in studies of the Qur’an highlighting some of the conciliatory dimensions of the Qur’an. They have earned sufficient credibility that they are invited to work with the madrasas in redeveloping the curriculums with an emphasis on peacemaking commitments that ameliorate the jihadist themes that have been so prominent in the mardrasa movement.<sup>22</sup> These are transformational studies that temper the jihadist themes. However, this mission of peace-building is fraught with challenges. Douglas wrote me recently in grief sharing that one of their team members has been

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<sup>22</sup> Douglas Johnson, Azhar Hussain, Rebecca Cataldi, *Madrasa Enhancement And Global Security, A Model for Faith-Based Engagement*, (Washington: International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, 2008)

killed; yet the team persist for they believe deeply that peacemaking is the only viable way forward.

### **Sudan: Prayer and Visioning the Peace**

This team has also been involved in peace-making efforts in Sudan. This nation's conflicts have been fueled by religious, cultural, and ethnic diversities: Islam, Christianity, and traditional religion; Arab and Black; English and Arabic; North and South; wealth and poverty. Sudan has had two civil wars between the north and the south since independence: 1955-1973; 1983-2005. The north is Muslim Arab; the south black and predominantly traditional religion and rapidly Christianizing. The last two decades of wars have devastated the south, with some two million dead. The bitterness that such a conflict breeds is a cancer, making peace-building efforts seemingly fruitless.

It is within that legacy of nearly four decades of wars that Johnston and his team worked engaging Islamic, Christian, and political persons of wisdom in Sudan within a forum to imagine what a peace accord between the north and south might look like. It was an enormous challenge. The organizers decided that the forum would not include persons in the centers of power, for they have constituencies. Rather this was a forum of wise persons who would provide counsel to the decision makers. When the meeting finally convened November 12-16, 2000, Christian prayer groups met for the duration of the consultation. Some groups came from abroad to join with locals interceding for reconciliation. These intercessory prayer groups were recognition that hostile strongholds have spiritual foundations that need to be addressed in prayer at the spiritual level.

This meeting of the Khartoum International Forum for Inter-Religious Cooperation and Peace was comprised of Muslim and Christian scholars and theologians who sought to address

the core issues robbing Sudan of peace. They developed recommendations, that became quite foundational to the peace accord that was finally implemented in January, 2005. This engagement demonstrates that peacemaking is hard work; it needs spiritual empowerment and prayer, with creative imagination, and forthright addressing of the issues.<sup>23</sup>

The astonishment of Christian peacemaking and reconciliation is that it is centered in the One who is “God with Us,” and who forgives and seeks to embrace the enemy who has nailed him to the cross.<sup>24</sup> This is the Gospel that surprises Muslims, and in fact believers in all other religions. Hans Kung asserts that the cross that reconciles is the preeminent distinctive of the Christian faith in a world of many religions.<sup>25</sup> As far as I can see, the reconciliatory grace of Jesus crucified and risen is our only hope in these troubled times, just as it is the hope within the ashes of decades of civil war in Sudan. After all the wisdom that has been shared in a forum such as that convened in Sudan, the grace of receiving and extending forgiveness is essential for authentic reconciliation and peace to prevail.

And that is a miracle! I was in Sudan a couple months ago. The Interfaith Council is considering translating and publishing *A Muslim and A Christian in Dialogue* so as to facilitate interfaith understanding. But the peace-building challenges are enormous when there is so much woundedness on all sides. The wounds are far deeper than mere understanding can heal.

### **East Africa: The People of the Lamb**

Another account from eastern Africa—when I was teaching at Kenyatta University College in Kenya in the 1970’s, I assigned my students to interview grandparents asking how

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<sup>23</sup> Douglas Johnston, editor, *Faith Based Diplomacy, Trumping Realpolitik*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 210-230.

<sup>24</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace, A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 99-166, 275-306.

<sup>25</sup> Hans Kung

they worked for reconciliation within African traditional religion before the Gospel was known. I received some 70 research papers from societies across Kenya. The Samburu are typical. The elders would meet with the warring warriors and pass judgment on steps toward restorative justice. When those steps were completed, they would all meet, elders and warriors, and slay a perfectly white bull. They would form a gate of peace which was comprised of the upright weapons forming an archway. As the warriors passed under the gate of peace the elders would sprinkle the blood of the bull on the warriors and the weapons. Thereafter they would feast on the bull, and feed each other the cooked meat. Then they would make bracelets of peace from the skin of the bull and each warrior would be given a bracelet. Thereafter warriors with the bracelet of peace could never fight each other, for they were bonded in a covenant of peace.

The research revealed that in every people group in Kenya the peace was always established by the slaying of a sacrificial animal in a covenant of reconciliation. Then I discovered the writings of the French anthropologist/theologian, Rene Girard, who observes that the sacrifice of a perfect animal or human for reconciliation is universal in primal religions. His thesis is that the innocent victim absorbs the violence, and does not take retributive revenge, and thereby breaks the cycle of violence. Rene insists that this phenomenon is a redemptive paradigm fulfilled in Jesus who is the best that humanity or God could offer. He is the Lamb of God, the innocent one who absorbs the violence and forgives, thereby breaking the cycle of violence and bringing authentic reconciliation.<sup>26</sup>

In East Africa there are fellowships of Christians known as the People of the Lamb who believe that Jesus, the Lamb of God, is indeed the fulfillment of the quest for reconciliation that the traditional sacrifices foreshadowed. They are reconcilers. During the Mau Mau wars for Kenyan independence from Britain in the 1950's, the people of the Lamb died as martyrs for

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<sup>26</sup> Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977).

their refusal to participate in the wars. I once asked one of the church leaders, who had an ugly scar across his face from an attack against him by the Mau Mau, why he refused to fight to defend himself. He responded, “In our traditional religions if the covenant lamb of reconciliation had been slain, we could not fight with others who had taken that covenant oath. How much more so must we be people of reconciliation when we have drunk from the cup of the covenant of the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God. I can never fight against a person for whom Christ has died.” These people of the Lamb became the authentic reconcilers as Kenya moved toward independence from British colonialism.

A decade after the Mau Mau wars Kenya was again at the brink of disaster. In 1969 the nation was on the abyss of inter-tribal civil war; traditional oaths with the sacrificial blood of animals were instituted; these oaths were a commitment to tribal supremacy binding the participants tribal ancestors and traditional deities. However, the people of the Lamb proclaimed that the blood of Jesus and the blood of the oaths do not mix. Consequently, again as during the Mau Mau, many died as martyrs. In the midst of it all thousands of the People of the Lamb convened a massive prayer meeting; they came from tribes across Kenya. They proclaimed to the nation that come what may they will love one another. That witness pulled Kenya back from the abyss.

Shortly thereafter Idi Amin took power in Uganda. He hijacked Islam, promising wealthy Arab nations that he would Islamize Uganda. Half a million Ugandans died through his atrocities. The People of the Lamb prayed. Finally the leadership of the church respectfully confronted the President. As a consequence the Church of the Province of Uganda Archbishop Janani Luwum was martyred in Kampala on February 16, 1977.

Over four thousand people ignored the police cordon and climbed the hill to the Namirembe Cathedral overlooking the city of Kampala. They could not bury their bishop for the authorities had taken the body to remote regions of Northern Uganda. Nevertheless, the hillside filled with the triumphant songs of the People of the Lamb. The amazed city below heard their joyous song, “Glory, glory, Jesus saves me! Blessed be his holy name. The cleansing blood has reached me! Hallelujah to the Lamb!”<sup>27</sup>

### **South Africa: Ethnic and Racial Reconciliation**

In the early 1990’s South Africa was on the brink of all out civil war. The apartheid system was crumbling, and powerful forces were jockeying for power. Prayer groups across the country interceded. Many worked for reconciliation, including a team of the People of the Lamb from East Africa. Forty guests from East Africa joined with reconciliation teams in South Africa. They visited the offices of political leaders across the spectrum, listened, and prayed with these decision makers. Then they invited them to go for a safari into one of the national parks. They went in clusters of 12. After seeing the animals, they would sit around the campfire in the evenings listening to each other’s stories. Walls came down as political leaders began to learn to know one another as persons. Prayer and brief reflections from the scriptures were woven into these meetings of leaders who had never prayed together.

Finally, April 1994 was upon South Africa. The elections loomed. The political impasse was not yet resolved. Outside negotiators, Henry Kissinger and Lord Carrington, in despair assessed that South Africa would self destruct. Nevertheless, one of the people of the Lamb from Kenya persisted in working tirelessly behind the scenes. He was professor Washington Okumu. Thirty thousand people convened for prayer in the Durban Kings Cross Stadium. They represented the tribes and races of South Africa. Professor Okumu and the key political

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<sup>27</sup> Bishop Festo Kivengere, *Revolutionary Love*, (Nairobi: Africa Enterprise, 1981), 80-83.

protagonists met in a special off stage VIP lounge as a volume of prayer ascended to the throne of God. Peace was made! The political breakthrough happened. And South Africa had a peaceful transition from the apartheid regime to multi-ethnic and multi-racial governance. It was indeed a miracle. Then came the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions led by Bishop Desmond Tutu that carried forward the commitments to confession, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation that were so necessary for the healing of that nation.

### **Conclusion: The Lamb in the Center of the Throne**

In John's Patmos vision he sees "the Lamb slain standing" in the center of the throne of God, and this crucified and risen Lamb is given the book of history.<sup>28</sup> Why? Because through his blood he has purchased people for God from "every tribe and language and people and nation."<sup>29</sup> He forms these redeemed people into his kingdom and they serve within his kingdom. That is the central drama of history: the redemption of people from every people group who have been reconciled to God and to one another.

In Revelation 6 we discover that the first act of the Lamb is to send forth a white horse with a rider with a crown who goes forth to conquer. He has only a bow in his hand, hardly a weapon of war. Could it be that this horse is a metaphor for the church and the rider is Jesus and the Gospel of Reconciliation? The later horses are the contexts in which the church, takes the Gospel of reconciliation: famine, wars, plagues, natural calamities, and martyrdom for the sake of the Gospel. We bear witness to the Gospel of reconciliation within the sometimes tumultuous contexts in which we serve; the witness is most authentic when people observe the praxis of reconciliation within contexts that are very other than the shalom of reconciliation

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<sup>28</sup> Revelation 5:6-7.

<sup>29</sup> Revelation 5:9.

The Lamb slain, stands within the throne of God; he is the power and authority center of the universe. The foolishness of the cross is indeed the power of God! Supremely the Lamb invests his authority in creating a people of reconciliation from every tribe and language and nation on earth! All of heaven and creation join in songs of praise and boundless joy as they see these communities of reconciliation being created around the world!

### **For Discussion and Discernment**

1. Reflect on approaches to reconciliation presented in these narratives that can be helpful within your context?
2. What is the relationship between justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace?
3. How should believers in Jesus Christ approach persons or communities that are not interested in reconciliation?
4. How do we faithfully bear witness to the Gospel of reconciliation within contexts where there is opposition to the presence of the church?
5. Within the polarizations of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are several wars going on sometimes fueled by religious and ideological commitments. How should churches who are minority communities faithfully bear witness to the Gospel of reconciliation in situations of polarization and conflict?
6. What is the difference between the church as a fellowship of repentant believers participating in reconciliation in Christ, and reconciliation with communities who are not participants in the fellowship of the church?

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