

The slow work of dialogue

For 20 years, Mennonite scholars from North America and Shi'a scholars from Iran have met periodically to build bridges.

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [April 2024](#) issue

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Muslim clerics walk in front of the Fatima Masumeh Shrine in the city of Qom, Iran, about 80 miles south of the capital, Tehran, in February 2023 (AP Photo / Vahid Salemi).

“They’re just going to become a part of the propaganda machine,” the Iranian hostel manager in exile told my son in Antalya, Turkey, in the days before I left to observe a Shi’a-Mennonite dialogue group convening in Qom, Iran. He said this while pretending to bang his head against a doorframe.

The problem this man was articulating couldn't really be overstated. I arrived in Iran with a small group of North American Mennonite scholars at a moment of incredible volatility. Held in June 2023, this was the eighth installment of a more than 20-year effort to build relationships and meaningful discourse with their Iranian counterparts. In the months leading up to the departure date, more than 500 Iranian protesters had been killed in state-sponsored violence that rocketed across the country.

The protests began on September 13, 2022, when a 22-year-old Kurdish woman named Mahsa Amini was arrested by morality police officers for violating Iran's headscarf law. She died in custody three days later. Protests spread to more than 80 cities. On September 30, protesters gathered in front of a police station near the prayer site of the Great Mosalla of Zahedan. Security forces opened fire on them and later on Friday worshipers; the day has become known as Bloody Friday. On May 19, just 27 days before the Mennonites' arrival in Qom, three men were executed by the government in response to the protests. Iranian society had been rocked, and the government was scrambling to regain control of the narrative. It wasn't clear how the Mennonite group would be used.

The Mennonite delegation was also on edge. Visas had been granted only at the last possible minute. After arriving, one American professor was denied permission to leave the hotel. Security and surveillance around the Westerners' presence seemed heightened in comparison with the group's previous visits to Iran. Requests that the group made to visit scholars at institutions other than the host institution were repeatedly denied. "It's just not possible," the Iranian side's organizer, a tall, thin man in a white turban named Khavesh Haghani, told the group again and again, shaking his head sympathetically but offering no explanation.

In this atmosphere, it wasn't clear what dialogue would mean or where it would come from. Harry Huebner, who has been involved in these dialogues since 2007, said that even under the best of circumstances, "there's a lot of talking past each other." But now, in the midst of these heightened tensions, the possibility of being sequestered pawns in a game the Mennonites couldn't possibly understand seemed higher than ever.

But two things convinced the group to go ahead anyway. First, they might be able to see and feel for themselves what was happening in Iran, not only what they heard about through the media. They knew from previous experience that the media's version of Iran and the Iran that they'd encountered directly were often very

different. And second, they were convinced that dialogue was its own justification. If you are doing peace work as seriously as these Mennonites do peace work, you take every opportunity and any opening, however small. “The reason,” Huebner wrote in a 2016 paper on this subject, “is our shared humanity.” No propaganda machine would be allowed to stand in the way.

This dialogue group has its roots in an earthquake that devastated Iran’s northwest provinces in 1990. The earthquake killed more than 35,000 people, with another 100,000 injured. In the midst of the humanitarian crisis, Mennonite Central Committee, a worldwide humanitarian aid society, first sent medical supplies. Then, looking for a more personal connection in the midst of tragedy, MCC worked with the Iranian Red Crescent Society to build health centers. This was MCC’s first long-term relationship with Shi’a Muslims since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, when both the United States and Canada ended diplomatic relations with the new Iranian government that had deposed the US-backed shah and was now led by a Shi’a cleric called an ayatollah. Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, had died the year before the earthquake and been replaced by Ayatollah Khamenei.

Ed Martin, an MCC member and part of the delegation that I joined, was also part of those initial efforts. He and others felt that the US government was wrong to demonize Iran after the revolution. In a 2014 retrospective article about the relationships that evolved from humanitarian efforts to sustained dialogue, Martin wrote, “It seemed to some of us that, in Washington’s eyes, political Islam had replaced communism as the enemy and that Tehran, instead of Moscow, was seen as the source of all evil in the world. We felt that our organization should respond to demonstrate that it would help ease human need in any country, irrespective of its religion and politics. MCC wanted to reach out to the people of Iran in order to build bridges of understanding and friendship.”

By the late 1990s, these efforts had evolved. MCC started a student exchange program in which it sponsored students from the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom to come to the Toronto School of Theology to study philosophy of religion and be hosted by Mennonite communities there. Irma Dueck, a professor at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, remembers when she was invited to host what she understood were some of Iran’s most conservative male students from an all-male institution. She was not at all sure that she wanted to do that, and yet she found the friendships forged in that environment to be some of the most life-giving in her experience. She continues to participate in the dialogues

whenever she can.

One of those students was Yousef Daneshvar, now a professor at IKERI. He spent 12 years in Canada among Mennonites and is a key Shi'a leader in the ongoing dialogues. "I very soon found myself in a dialogue of life with these Mennonites by whom I was surrounded," Daneshvar told me. "And that has never stopped after all these years. This dialogical approach has been in everything I do. It is with me all the time."

I wondered where to look for this "dialogue of life" in Qom, given the present circumstances. The program that we had been put on seemed to have been scripted for us by powers that we could not see, and little of it felt like the open-ended, openhearted exchange of ideas that I thought of when I thought of dialogue. I had heard from others who had attended these dialogues that I shouldn't necessarily search in the official forum. I'd been encouraged to look around the edges, to peer beneath the surface, to see where the hidden fruits might be.

On a day trip to Tehran—during which few of our group's requests to meet with scholars were accommodated—young Iranian guides peppered the Mennonites with numerous questions. They wanted to know if Christianity could truly be considered a monotheistic religion, how Christians raised their children in the faith, and even how they defined democracy and the relationship between government and religion. The distinctiveness of the Mennonite tradition came through in these conversations. Mennonites have specific ideas about how children claim the faith of their parents—generally through believers' baptism. And their understanding of government's relationship with religion was forged through a long history of intense persecution. So these conversations were lively and relevant, full of mutual learning.

On another day, at a dinner at the home of a scholar who was not part of IKERI, the North Americans feasted with Iranians on *khoresh*, *tahdig*, and olives in a pomegranate and walnut sauce, while talking about everything from the price of higher education to marriage traditions in both cultures to theology and the meaning and purpose of life itself. Friendships sprang up naturally, along with genuine curiosity. The conditions of hospitality made dialogue seem almost inevitable, as if—as Daneshvar had said at the opening of the formal dialogue sessions—dialogue is just what humans naturally do and always have done.

At lunch one day, we were joined by Hamed Shah Rafati, a young scholar and the director of international affairs at the University of Religions and Denominations, another of Qom's dozens of educational institutes. He pointed to the naturalness of dialogue as well, but he added that there are some conditions that had to be met. "Dialogue is kebab around a table," he said. "That is dialogue. Without kebab, there is no dialogue." He joked that he would only come for the snack breaks at IKERI, because that was the only time dialogue was likely to happen. He was eager to overcome what he thought was the primary barrier between Shi'a Muslims and North Americans. "We don't know each other," he said. "If you are in America, you don't know what Iran is. . . . You have to come here. You have to meet people to know what Iran is."

Hours later, when the scholars met for the start of the formal Shi'a-Mennonite dialogues at IKERI, there was no kebab and no Rafati. Would there be dialogue? The first thing I noticed that I thought likely to impede dialogue were the cameramen. There were three or four of them buzzing around the long, narrow classroom, getting ready to record every moment of the conversation. All the scholars acted as if the cameramen were not present, but they moved around the small space awkwardly with cords and cameras of various sizes. I wondered who would be watching these videos. This wasn't the first time in my few days in Iran that I'd noticed the preponderance of video cameras. I thought back to the hostel manager in Turkey: How could they use these videos to make us part of the propaganda machine?

Around the table sat a number of Shi'a clerics, most of them wearing the traditional turban, cassock, and cloak that signals their position of higher learning in the Shi'a hierarchy. A few—Daneshvar and Mohamed Fanaei, a scholar who specializes in Farsi poetry—joined the North Americans in dressing in standard-issue Western academic wear: open-collared shirts and slacks. Everyone from both groups was a man, except me.

Between Shi'a and Mennonites there are few shared premises, whether theological, ecclesiological, academic, or clerical. They have different ideas and experiences about how places of worship are organized, what it means to take a scriptural text as an authority, what it means to give a paper in an academic setting, and who has the authority to speak on various subjects and about what. Mennonites are in many ways egalitarian in their approach to the spiritual life. Their churches tend to be led by laypeople. They read scriptures in search of a communal as well as a personal authority, but they don't tend to look outside their own communities and hearts for

that authority.

Within Islam, the Shi'a tradition is perhaps the most hierarchical in structure. Clerics earn degrees of honor through their scholarship, institutional placement, and personal connections. The designation of ayatollah is bestowed through what North Americans might call an informal process, but it is a designation that carries tremendous weight. You would never claim the title yourself, but gradually, over time, as your personal authority and credibility grows, as your learning and scholarship increases, your colleagues might begin to refer to you as an ayatollah—and that designation gives you great authority to interpret the Qur'an and influence the society.

The contrast in sources causes some difficulties in the dialogue—at a subtle level. The Mennonites often referenced books and works encountered in their North American context that the Shi'a scholars have no access to, while the Shi'a scholars referred to the Qur'an with implications and depth that the Mennonite scholars couldn't relate to.

Over the course of eight dialogues, the scholars had identified topics of shared interest that highlight both differences and shared concerns: the challenge of modernity (2002), religion and authority (2004), peace and justice (2009), and youth and religion (2019). The topic for this dialogue: What is religion? Chris Huebner, Harry's son and the scholar tasked with bringing the Mennonite side of philosophy and religion to the table, said that whenever he participates in the dialogues, he struggles to find a "meeting point that is authentically Mennonite, invested in the philosophy of religion, and meaningful to the Shi'a scholars at the same time."

While the two groups attempt, from such different backgrounds and traditions, to clarify what each means by authority or scripture or revelation or justice or spirituality, the forces of politics and propaganda howl unmercifully overhead. Each dialogue, whether in Canada or Iran, feels like a tiny miracle of existence. Even to be in the same room at the same time is an extreme feat.

Daneshvar opened the first evening of the formal dialogue with a call to the group to pursue truth together. Just talking about their perspectives was not enough, he said. But if they could find and articulate truth together, then they would be doing something magnificent and worthy of bringing these two groups together. After only a few days in Iran, I wondered how likely this was. As far as I could tell, there was

going to be enough difficulty in finding a premise to talk to each other, let alone engage in a truth-finding mission. But I had to admit that Daneshvar knew the capacities of the group far better than I did. My cynicism might even have been caused by the paranoia of surveillance.

What I observed over the first two days was a genial enough exercise in what Harry Huebner had called “talking past each other.” Scholars gave papers. The Qur’anic quotations floated past me. I observed small moments of understanding, seeds of a possible conversation, but not the conversation itself. I continued to wonder what a dialogue really was and how I would know it when I saw it.

But on the third day, all hope seemed lost. The morning opened with a cleric I hadn’t seen before, who had come in for the express purpose of giving his paper, titled “Common Capacities of Abrahamic Religions for Global Civilization.” As the paper progressed, I didn’t hear anything that I recognized as a common capacity. Even the word *common* seemed to have taken on a meaning opposed to my understanding: while I think the word means “something that we both hold,” for him it seemed to mean “meaning that I impose on you without your input.” He seemed to be creating parameters likely to exclude dialogue while still claiming the ground for it.

For example: “An authoritative source, in our opinion, is nothing except the Qur’an.” I can concede, as a part of dialogue, that the Qur’an is an authoritative source for you. But isn’t it important in dialogue for you to concede that it isn’t an authoritative source for me? There seemed to be no room for the Mennonites’ point of view in this scholar’s logic. When he said, “If there exist different religions,” he seemed to be attempting a definition of religion that excluded difference. It felt like a kind of doublespeak. “Religion,” he said, “tries to remove difference.” Could the removal of difference lead to dialogue?

Even though I found this cleric’s tone and content anti-dialogic, full of a domineering logic that was making me increasingly uncomfortable, I was still surprised when his paper turned to justifications for violence in Islam. It didn’t seem relevant to the question, What is religion? It seemed, as I tried to follow the paper’s logic, to appear out of nowhere.

He noted that Christian scriptures urge followers to “turn the other cheek,” but “Islam says that if someone wants to fight you, you should fight. If someone wants to kill you, you should kill them.” I watched the room carefully for a response, and at

first I didn't see any reaction at all. I noted his comments and wrote them down. I didn't know whom they were for, to whom they were directed. At first, I thought they were perhaps directed, with some understated hostility, toward the Western delegation that this cleric saw as hostile both to Islam and to Iran. Even though the cleric never once turned to look at the Mennonite delegation while he was giving his talk, still his comments felt potentially threatening, or at least highly unlikely to bear fruit.

He finished his talk. A Mennonite scholar delivered a paper called "Abraham, Abrahams, Abrahamic: Discourse about Religion and the Commonalities of the Abrahamic Traditions," in which the word *common* had the meaning I was accustomed to. Then there was a discussion period.

The colleagues of the cleric who had spoken first lost no time in addressing his logic. "Of course," one said, so mildly it would be easy to misunderstand what was being said, "the Qur'an teaches that forgiveness is always better than violence." Another jumped in: "Islam is fundamentally a religion of peace."

The cleric who had raised the subject of violence in Islam doubled down at this redirection offered by his colleagues. "Temptation is worse than killing," he said. I wondered how the term *temptation* had come up. "Because societies that promote temptation also promote killing, so we should stop them."

But the other clerics were relentless in their opposition to this logic. The Mennonites said nothing as the conversation among the clerics became almost heated. The tone of scripted platitudes was gone, and though they spoke so quietly and respectfully to one another that you might not have known disagreement was happening, it was. The atmosphere in the room was intensifying.

Gradually, it dawned on me. They weren't talking about us at all. They were talking about what was happening in their own society. We provided the context and served as witnesses. This was happening in a foreign language (English), in our presence, because that was the only way it could happen at all. And now I understood: this was dialogue in its strange essence. It isn't two parties talking at or even past each other. It isn't even direct exchange. Dialogue happens when the other becomes visible in perhaps a novel way, and violent or domineering logics are disrupted.

At the next coffee break, I observed that something about the energy in the room had changed. New conversations were now breaking out. Between one Mennonite

scholar and two clerics, I overheard a conversation about the meaning of the word *secular*. They were discovering that when they each used this word, they meant something different. Others were talking about religious experience, Persian poetry, and the role of the media in creating or shutting down dialogue. The group went to lunch together and sat around plates of kebab.

“Dialogue is the logic of friendship,” Harry Huebner wrote in his 2016 article, “and friendship is the logic of peace.”

Later the group discussed two terms in Arabic that unraveled a distinction that now felt crucial: *wahda* means unity; *tahda* means uniformity. There can be a very fine line between the two, and they can be easily misunderstood and conflated. But dialogue relies on the former and cannot stand up under the weight of the latter.

Harry Huebner says that he gets frustrated, over these 20 years, with the pace of the dialogue. He will think that some new premise for conversation has been gained and then realize that they are right back where they started—misreading and misinterpreting each other. But Daneshvar points to his own experience. At first, he said, in the dialogue of life, he was shedding certain stereotypes that he had held about Christians. Then he gradually came to “see the meaning of certain Christian doctrines more deeply and more clearly.” Then, over time, those meanings allowed him to see his own faith and even his own self more clearly. “There were certain commonalities” between Christianity and Islam, he said, “but it was not the similarities that eventually became important to me.” The search for truth required the discovery and articulation of meaningful differences, and that has helped to make him a better Muslim.

I asked Daneshvar if he ever felt the hopelessness that I had felt at moments in the dialogue, that the differences between the two groups would overwhelm any possibility of meaningful connection. “Never,” he said. “Never, never.”

The dialogue proceeds through subtle, small movements, some imperceptible, some noticeable only over time. Some years ago, Harry Huebner, an avid gardener, took some watermelon seeds back to Canada with him from Iran. The watermelon he’d eaten in Iran was the best he’d ever had, and he wondered if it would take in his Manitoba soil. Ten years later, he has truckloads of Iranian watermelon.