

Iranian-Shi'a-Muslim and U.S.-Reformed-Christian
Interreligious Dialogue

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Traveling to Iran was the furthest thing from my mind. Traveling to Iran as part of a group of Americans certainly had never crossed my radar screen of possibilities. Sitting around a table in Iran with other U.S.-Americans and with Muslim clerics was a scene I had never, ever envisioned.

“Never say ‘Never’” once again has proven to be a reliable dictum. Totally unforeseen just over a year ago, during the past ten months I have gone to Iran twice with other representatives from the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). During that same period two other PCA groups also quite unexpectedly went to Iran, both in January to contribute to relief efforts following the tragic Bam Earthquake. Again, all of these ventures have arisen to everyone’s complete surprise.

The overarching framework that had made these exchanges unimaginable has of course been the hostile political relationship between Iran and the United States. Ever since the 1978-1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the ensuing Hostage Crisis—a full quarter-century ago—diplomatic ties have been officially severed. Televised images of blindfolded compatriots in front of the (former) U.S. Embassy in Tehran are etched onto U.S.-Americans’ memories. U.S. support of Iraq in its devastating 1980s war with Iran further damaged Iranians’ feelings towards the U.S. The recent U.S.-led invasion of Iraq has not improved Iranian suspicions about U.S. goals in the Middle East, and U.S. suspicions about Iran’s nuclear ambitions similarly have compounded the seemingly irreconcilable mutual mistrust.

Moreover, religious differences (both real and perceived) between Iranian Muslims and U.S.-American Christians have only served to widen the existing international gap between us. My own unexamined instincts told me that all Iranians were rabid fundamentalist Muslims, a label made all the more frightening since the tragic events of 9/11. Also, my membership in a theologically and socio-politically conservative Reformed Christian tradition is not an automatic and necessary encouragement to pursue empathetic understanding of different fundamentalist religious groups.

It is no wonder, then, that the interactions that have occurred within the past year have come as a surprise.

On the one hand I want to be careful not to exaggerate the importance of these recent trips to Iran. After all, other groups of Westerners have traveled to Iran in recent years, and the trips that the PCA groups have taken have not merited, nor have they received, a great deal of publicity. At the same time, given the present-day political and associated religious climate, the fact that conservative U.S. Christians and Iranian Muslims would meet together in Tehran and in Qom is noteworthy enough for an examination of some of the associated political and religious implications. This paper will attempt to offer at least some aspects of

that examination, particularly of the interreligious dialogue meeting that took place in Tehran in early June.

In order to put such an analysis in its proper context, it will help first to give an account of the background and actual execution of the trips.

Background

In the spring of 2003, word came that a PhD candidate (from a different institution) wished to make an appeal to us the faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary, located in St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.A. His appeal was in effect for us to pursue interacting with certain Muslim academics and clerics in Iran. While conducting in Iran his PhD research in Islamic studies, this candidate had encountered several scholars who wanted to have direct dialogue with Western Christian counterparts. Aware of a few European and other U.S.-American Christian scholars that had been in contact with some of these Iranian Muslim leaders, this PhD candidate reasoned that Evangelical, Reformed Christian representatives would complement the mix. Having a number of relationships within the PCA, he first approached its Director of International Relations (DIR) about pursuing some of these relationships. They concluded that Covenant, as the PCA's denominational seminary, would be the most appropriate institution to spearhead the effort.

It was unusual that on short notice the PhD candidate and DIR were able to appear before the faculty at one of our stated meetings. The faculty was enthusiastic about the multifaceted potential of contacting groups in Iran recommended by the PhD candidate. Our seminary president soon sent emails to these groups, introducing Covenant Theological Seminary and expressing our willingness to interface with them if they so desired. To our pleasant surprise in short order we received favorable responses to our overtures.

Our next step was to follow through with a concrete suggestion that a few of us travel to Iran to meet them personally. Again the reply was favorable, and we agreed that early October would be an opportune time to make such a trip. The PhD candidate could arrange his schedule to be in Iran for research then and to introduce us to the appropriate people.

For our parts on the U.S. side, we had at least two matters to settle. First was how to acquire our visas. We decided to go as tourists—which meant working through a tourist agency in Iran and then actually touring. The agency we selected helped us received approval for our visas in Iran, then we received our tourist visas through the Iranian Interests Section of the Pakistani Embassy in Washington, D.C. One of the groups in Iran with whom we were to meet actually offered to assist us with this matter of acquiring our visas, but the tourist agency was able to take care of things quickly and efficiently.

The second matter had to do with who would go on the trip. While I had hoped that another active member of the Covenant faculty could accompany the DIR and me, this proved difficult given the timing of a week-plus trip in the middle of a school term, especially with such little lead time to prepare for being away. It was not until early August that we approached a recently retired church history professor who 20 years earlier had also served as Covenant Seminary's president. He was eager to go and help represent the seminary, and his field of expertise was a good fit for the trip. The three of us thus completed our preparations by the end of September, and in early October we found ourselves in Tehran at the beginning of our exploratory trip.

October Trip

I found two matters particularly striking during our first day in Tehran. First was the rather obvious reality that Tehran is a typical large, several-million population city with challenges of slums, immigrants and congestion. While the sound of “Tehran” may conjure up certain feelings in a U.S.-American’s heart and mind, it is in many ways “just another” major city. Second was the way in which daily life did *not* stop for prayer times. Moreover, it was difficult to hear the regular calls to prayer. Explanations we were given about this were that Shi’a Islam is considerate of those who need to rest or otherwise would be unnecessarily disturbed by a loud call to prayer, and that people can make up their prayer times at other, more convenient times. While I would not want to dispute either of those explanations, observation alone indicated that most people were busy with their daily lives apart from much conscious religious devotional practice.

Our group of three next enjoyed three marvelous days of touring in Isfahan, south of Tehran. This beautiful and charming city provided a marvelous opportunity for becoming even more comfortable and relaxed at being in a country that comprises in part U.S. President Bush’s “axis of evil.” Historic bridges, Armenian churches, mosques and palaces exhibited striking architecture and evoked feelings of wondering admiration. The magnificent city square, with the adjoining bazaar and tea shop, were all great fun. By the time of our return to Tehran, we were all feeling quite at ease about being in a place that just a few days earlier struck in our hearts a measure of fear and anxiety.



One of Isfahan’s Historic Bridges

Back in Tehran, and on a day trip to the religious center of Qom, we had several meetings with Muslim academics and clerics. At the Center for Religious Studies in Qom, our church historian lectured on church-state relations in the West. He and all of us were warmly received. Through our various encounters we were gaining a small picture of the kind of ferment that exists in Iranian intellectual circles. While we realized that we were meeting only a small segment of scholars in Iran, the openness and desire for expanded interaction with others was obvious.

Along with the genuine but informal mutual commitments to be in touch with several of the people we had met, the primary official institutional follow-up was solidified on our last day in Tehran. The Director of the Institute for Interreligious Dialogue (IID) <www.iid.org.ir>, with whom we had met earlier in our trip, came to our hotel expressing the desire to host a conference with us in several months. The IID, established by the Iranian Vice President, Seyed Mohammad Ali Abtahi,¹ was a progressive center that had a proven track record of dialogue sessions, published research, and commitment to scholarly excellence. This seemed to our group to be an ideal organization with which we could pursue further a constructive relationship of friendly dialogue. The Director—Vice President Abtahi’s wife—suggested the overall conference topic of “Motivations and Obstacles to Interreligious Dialogue Within Our Respective Religious Traditions,”—which we all thought was an entirely appropriate theme and thus agreed wholeheartedly. Such a topic would be a non-threatening first step, whereby we each could reflect on our own traditions in each other’s presence. Each side would present three or four papers, followed by discussion and interaction.

Before departing from Iran we discussed who the presenters from our side might be. Besides presenting an opportunity for interacting with Iranian scholars, the conference also provided a constructive avenue for Covenant Theological Seminary and other like-minded institutions to cooperate through representative scholars. As I coordinated assembling the team of presenters, the final lineup ended up consisting of a faculty member from Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, one from Covenant College near Chattanooga, Tennessee, and my Covenant Seminary colleague Dr. Hans Bayer, Associate Professor of New Testament.² These three would write papers for the conference, and I would present an introductory paper. The PCA DIR would make opening remarks, and a small group of supporting PCA members would accompany our team of presenters.

Preparation for the June Trip

As the presenters composed their papers, one point of approach we took was not to be overly academic; hence, we eschewed references, for example. On a different note, we realized mid-stream that we had varying understandings of the type of posture we were taking in the papers. On the one hand, our group of three had returned from Iran correctly conveying to the presenters that our Iranian counterparts were interested in dealing honestly with people who had clear and basic religious convictions, and that we should not simply try and minimize potential conflict by seeking the least common denominators in a comfortable dialogue session. At the same time, the conference topic—at least as I understood it—was to reflect on our own tradition in a way that did not approach infringing on the other’s beliefs and practices. Bringing these two impulses together was a challenge for our group, and only a difficult session together in February enabled us to forge a unified approach that both gently conveyed our convictions as well as presented our self-reflections.

It was also somewhat of a challenge to clear—largely through emails—various hurdles for the conference in coordination with the IID. When would the conference take place? What would the venue be? When and how would we send our respective papers? Who would translate the papers, and when? What would the conference format be? Answers turned out to be as follows: in the end, June 7 became the conference date (our group traveled June 1-11). The venue would be the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran. We acquired a translator in Tehran, enabling us to send both English and Farsi papers several weeks in advance of the conference. We received from the IID a conference schedule a few weeks in advance, but despite hopes to the contrary we never received the other side’s papers until the actual day of the conference.

As for our visas to enter Iran, we inquired through the same travel agency we had used before if we should seek something other than tourist visas, given our purpose of going for an interreligious dialogue meeting. After checking into the matter they recommended and acquired

for us approval once again for tourist visas, which we received in similar fashion as for the October trip. Having gone to Isfahan in October, we opted for Shiraz on this trip.

It should also be pointed out once again the significance of two PCA groups that went to Bam for earthquake relief work in January. Besides helping those in need, these trips helped strengthen bonds of trust with both the Iranian tourist agency and others in Iran we were coming to know. These relationships were of course furthered through our June 1-11 trip.

June Trip in General

Ten PCA representatives made the trip: five supporting members, three paper presenters, the PCA DIR and I. It was fascinating to observe others go through the same kind of reorientation of preconceived notions about Iran and Iranians that the DIR and I had experienced in October, particularly in connection with the friendly reception we received by everyday people, as well as the beauty and history of sites visited. Our two-night trip to Shiraz³ was highlighted by a day trip to Persepolis and Parsagadae. Everyone was thrilled to explore the remains of great palaces and tombs of the biblical-era Persian kings Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, Artaxerxes and others. This experience, accentuated by the encyclopedic knowledge of our guide, further cemented our group's emotional connection to Iran and its history. In Shiraz we also visited the tomb of the famous Persian poet Hafez, the "Pink Mosque," the botanical gardens and other memorable sites.



With Hans Bayer (R) overlooking Persepolis

After returning to Tehran Sunday evening June 6, the interreligious dialogue conference itself was held on Monday.⁴ Tuesday we took a day trip to Qom, the single most conservative religious center of Iran and home of numerous seminaries, a city equivalent to Najaf in Iraq. There we toured the inspiring “Great Library of Ayatollah Al-Uzma Mar’ashi Najafi.” We then visited the Center for Religious Studies—where our group of three had spent a meaningful time in October—followed by lunch with some of the Center’s members.⁵ In the afternoon we strolled through the outer confines of the exquisite Shrine to Fatima the sister of the 8th Imam. We also had the opportunity to tour a large seminary, as well as the house of Imam Khomeini. The modesty and frugality of Khomeini’s environment were in stark contrast to the extravagance of the Shah’s palaces we visited on the trip, a fact not lost on our group. Also noticeable to our group was the conservative feel of Qom relative to Shiraz and Tehran, for example in the ubiquitous black chadors worn by all women.

Our remaining two days in Tehran were spent touring various sites, plus squeezing in some souvenir shopping. On Thursday morning we visited the IID for a follow-up discussion about Monday’s conference.⁶ Our group flew out of Tehran for home late Thursday night.

This general trip journal serves as the backdrop for the June 7 interreligious dialogue symposium. It also serves as an account of how our U.S.-American group had such a positive experience touring Iran. While going with a measure of anxious fear, we left with sense of having experienced a nation rich in heritage and culture.

One Note of Evaluation

Especially in light of the IAMS conference theme dealing with integrity, it is worth considering the fact that the group went to Iran on tourist visas. Let me state immediately that I do not raise this matter in such a way so as to suggest that there was some kind of deceit involved, whether in the process of applying for the visas or in the participants’ behavior while in Iran. I trust that the accounts just given dispel any such possibility. Rather, the matter worth considering relates to the corresponding economic level within which our group functioned as tourists. We stayed in luxury hotels, we ate abundant meals, we had first-rate transportation and we purchased a noteworthy amount of gifts and souvenirs. Being a Christian group, was there a discrepancy between our religious identity and the upper-class status we enjoyed as tourists?

I don’t see how any analysis can explain away that particular tension point. At the same time, it does help to note that our group was not simply a touring Christian group. On the one hand, we were cognizant of our IID hosts’ concern that we be well received and treated. There was no need to cause any embarrassment to them or to us by creating a situation that might have been construed as poor hospitality—which also would have gone against the grain of generous Iranian hospitality. Also, as U.S.-Americans, security was a concern, both for us and for our Iranian hosts. Touring at the level recommended by our travel agency helped ensure that we were both safe and monitored in our various activities.

In short, while Christian affluence is not necessarily an oxymoron, as Christians we must be aware of the special place in God’s economy of the poor and marginalized—as well as of the complicated and multifaceted situations in life we encounter.

Socio-Political Implications

In light of the poor political relationship between Iran and the United States, a trip like this one could not be without some measure of international, socio-political significance. Such a claim is not to make the trip’s impact more grandiose than it actually is. For one, there

are a few U.S.-Americans actually living in Iran, both long-term⁷ and on a more temporary basis.⁸ Moreover, U.S.-Americans do in fact travel to Iran—even though the numbers have been low over the past 25 years, with a fresh drop since 9/11.⁹ Having made those qualifications, it is safe to say that a group of ten U.S.-Americans like ours, going to Iran for disaster relief or for touring, is not an everyday event.

This trip of course was not any sort of government-commissioned ambassadorial delegation from the U.S. to Iran. Ever since diplomatic ties were mutually severed during the 1979-81 Hostage Crisis, there have been no such overt U.S.-government missions to Iran.¹⁰ Recently, however, in the spirit of President Khatami's affirmation to the United Nations of Iran's willingness to participate in a "Dialogue Among Civilizations,"¹¹ there have been a small number of exchanges of sports teams and cultural groups (although the Iranian Wrestling Federation's cancellation, in protest of U.S. military action in Najaf and Karbala, Iraq,¹² of their team's participation in the June 17-20 Titan Games in Atlanta¹³ shows the fragility of such exchange arrangements). Our group's trip—either as a tour or as an interreligious dialogue partner—was not nearly as attention-grabbing as these types of spectator events. At the same time, various journalists were in fact in attendance at the dialogue conference; the venue for the symposium was within the government's ministry of foreign affairs complex; the dialogue sponsor, the IID,¹⁴ is a government-recognized NGO; and, Vice President Abtahi was present and presiding throughout the day. Given that list of factors, then, this dialogue conference between Iranians and U.S.-Americans bore at least the same type of socio-political significance as more media-celebrated events.

The trip's weight in terms of political significance increases upon considering both the continuous and the long-range character of U.S.-Iranian antagonism. Within the past 25 years of simmering hostilities was the too-easily forgotten July 3, 1988 incident of the shooting down of an Iranian civilian jetliner by a U.S. missile cruiser. All 290 people aboard the aircraft were killed when the USS Vincennes mistook the aircraft for an attacking Iranian F-14 fighter plane.¹⁵ Moreover, Iranian anger and resentment towards the United States did not begin with the overthrow of the shah in the Islamic Revolution of the late 1970s. One needs to go back to the 1950s to mark the time when "the large reservoir of goodwill for America in Iran began to dry up."¹⁶ Whereas there had been Iranian suspicion of Russia and especially Britain for their imperial encroachments in Persia from the 19th century, in the wake of a brief period of mutual "neglect"¹⁷ the U.S. began to replace Britain as Iran's chief antagonist due the CIA's direct role in helping to overthrow Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq in 1953 and restoring Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to power, as well as by cooperating with the British in brokering oil agreements seen by Iran as unfavorable.¹⁸ Constant U.S. support of the shah's government, as a bulwark against Soviet expansion, helped to serve both the buildup of Iran's military capabilities and increased tyranny and corruption.¹⁹ The 1964 immunity-extraterritoriality agreement, whereby U.S. military and Defense Department personnel and their families in Iran were solely under U.S. criminal jurisdiction, caused widespread outrage and bitter resentment. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini cried out on October 26, 1964, "If someone runs over a dog belonging to an American, he will be prosecuted. Even if the shah himself were to run over a dog belonging to an American, he would be prosecuted. But if an American cooks runs over the shah, the head of state, no one will have the right to interfere with him." The already suspect Khomeini was exiled to Turkey one week later, and he never forgave the U.S. for the immunity agreement.²⁰ Clearly the 1978-1979 Revolution, accompanied by its anti-U.S. character, did not occur in a vacuum.

The virile anti-U.S. posture of the Iranian government continues to this day. If part of the rationale for this posture is perceived U.S. imperialism, the other corresponding part is perceived unqualified U.S. support for the state of Israel. These two intertwined components

are only intensified at the present time by U.S. military involvement in next-door Iraq, as well as by tensions over Iran's nuclear development. The present U.S. administration's seemingly automatic critical stance towards Iran completes the circle of the hostile relationship.

Within such an environment, trips like ours are all the more crucial to help create more peaceful and trusting circumstances. One point of follow-up to our lunch in Qom is the distinct possibility of some of the Iranian Muslim scholars from the Center for Religious Studies coming to Covenant Theological Seminary for a brief period of guest-study, perhaps as early as this coming fall. This type of exchange would also help foster a less volatile and more understanding U.S.-Iranian socio-political relationship, even if on an extremely small and local scale.

June 7 Interreligious Dialogue Conference

Along with the touring that our group was able to do in Iran, the focal point of the trip was the June 7 interreligious dialogue conference. Certain details of the day-long conference and its preparation have already been described. To lead into an analysis of the dialogue itself, first I will set forth the progression of the interaction throughout the actual event itself.



Prior to the June 7 Interreligious Dialogue Conference

Vice President Abtahi offered initial greetings and introductory remarks.²¹ He stressed the vastness of God's interests in comparison to human objectives, as well as the importance

of all humans being in direct spiritual relationship with God. The PCA DIR then gave his initial remarks, in which he noted that our team had come to dialogue with respect and conviction—not to avoid, compromise or confront. The exchange of gifts and pleasantries help to set the stage for a constructive day together.

With the first pair of papers on dialogue and scripture, however, a significant polarization quickly became apparent. The Iranian side's paper, entitled "The Quran and Interreligious Dialogue," took a clear position of dialogue within religious pluralism—contra monologue within exclusivism. This strong assertion was made both by noting that pluralism was the proper philosophical view for dialogue, as well as by a litany of references demonstrating the Quran's teaching on accepting religious plurality. The first U.S. Christian paper,²² "An Evangelically Reformed Approach to the Bible: Some Implications for Muslim-Christian Interaction," sought to assert that Christians and Muslims alike should offer each other the freedom to follow the teachings of their respective books *prima facie*. However, the paper appeared to some as intolerant and exclusivist, thus prompting Mr. Abtahi to raise a direct question to that effect and (we later learned) the Iranian Muslim presenter to tailor his paper towards a strong argument for religious pluralism.

After a coffee break, the next U.S. paper on "Pre-Conditions for Authentic Communication" shifted the focus onto the necessity of having a humble, learning posture upon engaging in dialogue. The corresponding Iranian paper, "Pre-Conditions for Interreligious Dialogue from the perspective of Islam," reinforced the first Muslim paper's clear insistence on pluralism versus exclusivism. Following lunch together we had the third and final pair of papers, both of which struck a self-reflective tone. The Iranian presentation, "Theological Motivations and Obstacles to Interreligious Dialogue from the perspective of Islam," sought honest dialogue, the tackling of such difficult questions as how to recognize mutually exclusive ethical practices (e.g., concerning diet), and joint religious practices, such as prayer. The U.S. paper, "Theological Motivations and Hindrances to Interreligious Dialogue,"²³ traced Dr. Bayer's own journey through German rationalistic humanism to an evangelical faith in Christ as the redeeming God. Noteworthy was Mr. Abtahi's characterization, at the beginning of the subsequent discussion period,²⁴ of Dr. Bayer's approach to God as mystical and internal. Noteworthy as well was an Iranian Muslim observer's comments about the importance of good deeds and actions (a theme that had been stressed in some of the Iranian presentations), exemplified in someone nationally and religiously different, as seen in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

I then gave a summary paper, supplemented with a few bullet-point observations of the day's proceedings. Among those concluding points was the expressed desire that we as Evangelically Reformed Christians were hoping, in our developing views of other religions and of dialogue, to strike a third course that avoided the pitfalls of both a monologue-type of exclusivism and an ideological pluralism. I also noted that hearing about religious pluralism ala John Hick, et al was not new to us—but that hearing it from them was indeed new to us, and we were thus driven to wonder what it meant for them in their context to stand for such a position. I also raised the question as to what extent persuasion could or should be a part of dialogue. Following some impromptu remarks by one of the Jewish guest-observers about the necessary political character of such dialogue meetings, the IID Director gave a summarizing paper entitled "Dialogue: Descend from the summit," advocating peaceful dialogue and the common message of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.

Vice President Abtahi concluded the day's proceedings with favorable remarks about the conference. He noted that the spirit of Jesus and Muhammad had prevailed, that dialogue itself is a worthy goal in terms not of persuading or seeking political gains but of establishing relationships, and that the constructive dialogue we had shared—given the PCA's

conservatism and fundamentalist roots—had demonstrated that there need not be mutual fear between conservative Christians and Muslims.

June 10 Follow-up Evaluation Meeting

On the Thursday morning after the Monday dialogue conference, the U.S. presenters met at the Institute for Interreligious Dialogue with the IID Director and a few of her associates. Generally positive reflections about the conference were shared, and all agreed that it was a constructive early step in our relationship. (Interesting, though, was the Director's question seeking to clarify exactly with whom the IID should anticipate communicating and cooperating on a continuing basis. We noted that, while the ambiguity of this matter was further evidence of our relative inexperience in dialogue ventures, Covenant Theological Seminary would continue to spearhead the PCA's interreligious dialogue relationship with the IID and would therefore be the primary contact point—with me as the coordinator.)

The Director then offered her evaluation that our papers had been “less academic” than they had expected. Upon receiving the papers (both the English originals and the Farsi translations) several weeks prior to the conference, the IID thus had changed their lineup of presenters. Our group's immediate understanding of what “less academic” meant was tied to our collective decision to write our papers without references and not in a high scholarly manner. Upon further reflection and discussion after the meeting, however, we wondered if the Director had not been referring to our non-pluralistic, absolutist approaches. Cross-cultural and cross-lingual factors inhibit coming to a clear answer at this point.

The Director suggested two follow-up ventures, both of which we found agreeable. First was to publish the papers with the addition of two introductions, one from each side. Second was to explore some small-scale joint research projects on select subjects, whether doctrinal or contemporary issues. We had come hoping for a corresponding conference in the United States, and I made that appeal again.²⁵ The Director was reluctant to actively pursue that at this time, however—perhaps for reasons too complicated for us to grasp, for example political constraints—so we acquiesced and agreed to stick with her two very good suggestions for moving ahead together.

Analysis

Perhaps the first and foremost point of analysis of the dialogue encounter is the general matter of whether or not a discussion could proceed constructively between theologically conservative U.S. Christians and more liberally inclined Iranian Muslims. Any one of these corresponding adjectival pairs would have been challenging enough; combining all three factors of intellectual orientation, nationality, and religious affiliation complicated matters considerably.

The answer to this general question that emerged throughout the conference sessions was a general yes—but the answer is related to one's evaluative standpoint. Mr. Abtahi's positive evaluation rested on his view that peaceful dialogue is a sacred goal in-and-of-itself. Iranian observers we asked afterward noted the genuinely gracious reception offered to us by those associated with the IID, which was no small matter, they pointed out. As a team of presenters, our overall impression of the proceedings was a combined sense of strengthened friendship and polarized philosophical approaches.

Our team came away from the dialogue with a sense that the Iranian presenters allowed for one of two choices regarding viewing other religions and interreligious dialogue, namely exclusivism or pluralism. They argued firmly for a pluralist position. Since we appeared to be

exclusivists—who can only monologue—they must have wondered how we could effectively enter into dialogue.

That understanding about a conservative religious mindset is not uncommon. In describing Christian fundamentalism, Western analysts have noted that it harbors “a strong hostility to modern theology and to the methods, results and implications of modern critical study of the Bible.” Moreover, “the [ecumenical] problem is formed by the absolute and overweening certainty possessed by fundamentalists that their form of religious is absolutely and uniquely right.”²⁶ An additional analysis states that Christian “Fundamentalism is a regrettably unhistorical movement with reference to its understanding of theological history.”²⁷ Coupled with the categorization of Muslim fundamentalists also as those who can only “revolt against modernity,”²⁸ no wonder that we as conservative Christian scholars who believe in absolute truth would be seen as closed-minded exclusivists.

This is indeed an area where Evangelicals are seeking to grow and develop new wineskins. On the one hand we who are Western Evangelicals do have such philosophical backgrounds as forms of rationalism and of Scottish Common Sense Realism.²⁹ In many ways both of these philosophical traditions encourage someone to come to final and absolute conclusions about what is true and false, a mindset that does not lend itself to the necessary task of genuinely *listening* in practical situations within multireligious situations.³⁰ Moreover, we who are conservative Evangelicals are “exclusivist” insofar as we affirm such “nonnegotiables” as

the unique authority of Jesus Christ as the apex of revelation and the norm by which all other beliefs must be critiqued... that the Christian faith centers around the proclamation of the historical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the decisive event in human history.... [and] that salvation comes through repentance and faith in Christ’s work on the cross and that no one can be saved without an explicit act of repentance and faith based on the knowledge of Christ.³¹

While not wanting to be blindly bound by outdated and contextually relative ways of thinking, there are certain “nonnegotiable” characteristics and commitments we gladly embrace.

At the same time, as Evangelicals we do not consider ourselves afraid of facts, truth or thinking, for “all facts are God’s facts..., all truth is God’s truth, and right reason cannot endanger sound faith.”³² Furthermore, we know first-hand the benefit of dialogue as “a two-way encounter.” We know the enrichment that comes through “mutual exchange,” the more acute reflection arising from questions we are asked, and the helpful way “that our own stereotypes and misunderstandings of other religions are exposed.”³³ We as Evangelicals are struggling to forge new categories for understanding religions and dialogue, but there are constructive pointers that should enable us to avoid the pitfalls of pluralism on the one hand and a caricatured exclusivism on the other. Perhaps something along the lines of Charles Van Engen’s “Evangelist Paradigm,” in which the component parts of the basic Christian confession of “Jesus Christ is Lord” are emphasized in a faith-particularist, culturally-pluralist, and ecclesialogically-inclusivist manner, is one set of suggestions that holds great promise.³⁴

At any rate, a new way ahead is something that we as Evangelically Reformed Christians seek beyond the two narrow alternatives presented to us by our Iranian counterparts in the dialogue session. Additionally, in considering why they as liberally minded intellectuals would opt for pluralism so strongly, one cannot help but speculate about their contextual constraints. If they as progressives in present-day Iran do want to interact with others—including conservative U.S. Christian thinkers like our group represents—then they need

some framework that allows for plurality, while enabling them to remain committed to their own exclusively Islamic commitments. The personal, political risks of such ventures are real: the situation of Dr. Hashem Aghajari is a case in point. A University of Hamedan history lecturer, journalist, and active member of the reformist Islamic Revolution's Mujahideen Organization (IRMO), Aghajari was arrested and sentenced to death in 2002 because of an address commemorating the 25th anniversary of the death of one of the ideologues of the Islamic Revolution. In that speech, Aghajari “presented his own perception of ‘Islamic Protestantism’ and reform in Islam [as well as] criticized Iran's ruling religious establishment.”³⁵ Mentioning Aghajari's case is not to raise unnecessary alarm, nor is it to suggest that what our dialogue partners are pursuing is necessarily suspect by government officials. It simply is to point out the seriousness of public intellectual endeavors in Iran, so as to speculate as to why these particular thinkers would latch onto the ideology of religious pluralism so strongly.

A final point of analysis concerns the matter of persuasion in interreligious dialogue. Our counterparts discouraged as much (while seeking, one could argue, to persuade us of the necessity of religious pluralism). I for one believe persuasion needs to be factored in as one element of genuine, honest dialogue. First, as those who might be termed “engaged exclusivists,”³⁶ we who are conservative Evangelicals “must not succumb to the forces of religious pluralism that seek to bring to the table of dialogue a version of Christianity that has been robbed of its distinctiveness,” including such nonnegotiables as salvation in Jesus Christ. Also, “we must not view dialogue and witness as mutually exclusive.”³⁷ If the Christian faith (as well as Islam) is believed to be for all human beings, then it would only seem to be a genuine presentation of that faith to seek to persuade others of its truthfulness.

One proponent of interreligious dialogue has stated it this way: “If representative intellectuals belonging to some specific religious community come to judge at a particular time that some or all of their own doctrine-expressing sentences are incompatible with some alien religious claim(s), then they should feel obliged to engage in both positive and negative apologetics vis-à-vis these alien religious claim(s) and their promulgators.”³⁸ This obligation to seek to defend as well as to persuade is both an epistemic and an ethical obligation.³⁹ Such a position sees compelling intellectual and moral reasons for seeking to persuade one's counterpart in an endeavor of interreligious dialogue.

Undoubtedly there were attempts at persuasion during the June 7 interreligious dialogue conference in Tehran. They were not blatantly offensive, nor were they mean-spirited. They should of course never be such, but especially is that the case in an environment of needing to cultivate friendship and trust. Thankfully the Tehran symposium can be judged an overall success, and the fact that there are further matters to explore together is a positive sign of a constructive process that has begun well and, barring unforeseen obstacles, will continue.

Endnotes

¹ Mr. Abtahi's own personal website is <http://www.webnevesht.com/en/weblog/>.

² Hans Bayer is a native German with continuing German citizenship—which helped make our U.S.-American group a bit more international in its makeup.

³ Due to a prior commitment, one of the paper presenters was unable to travel to Iran until June 4 and was thus unable to make the initial trip to Shiraz.

⁴ More on this below.

⁵ More on this as well below.

⁶ Again, more on this below.

⁷ For example, Louise Firouz, originally from Great Falls, Virginia, has lived in Iran for 45 years. Scott Peterson, "US-Iran, through an expat's eyes," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 08, 2003. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0108/p06s01-wome.html>; accessed June 19, 2004.

⁸ Wally and Evie Shellenberger spent three years in Qom as part of an exchange between Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute. "Living in Iran gives couple chance to be loved by enemies," *Mennonite Mission Network*, May 14, 2004. <http://www.mennonitemission.net/Resources/News/story.asp?ID=502>; accessed June 19, 2004.

⁹ Our tour guide, as well as others such as shopkeepers, confirmed this post-9/11 drop in U.S.-American visitors.

¹⁰ In terms of covert operations, of course, there was the infamous 1986 U.S. mission to Iran intending to trade arms for the release of U.S. hostages held in Lebanon. James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations*. New Haven and London: The University Press, 1988, 307-308.

¹¹ H.E. Mr. Mohammed Khatami, "Round Table: Dialogue among Civilizations, United Nations, New York, 5 September 2000, Provisional verbatim transcription," Unesco, 2000. <http://www.unesco.org/dialogue2001/en/khatami.htm>, accessed June 19, 2004.

¹² Ali Azim-Araghi, "Iran Participation in Titan Games in Doubt," Iran Sports Press, May 24, 2004. http://www.iransportspress.com/artman/publish/article_802.shtml; accessed June 19, 2004.

¹³ "The Final Test: U.S. wrestlers to face Georgia at Titan Games," United States Olympic Committee, 2004. <http://www.usolympicteam.com/titangames/news/050604.cfm>; accessed June 19, 2004.

¹⁴ On the displayed banner in the conference room as well as in the printed program, the PCA was listed as the co-sponsor.

¹⁵ "FOR YOUR FILES: A Chronology of US-Mideast Relations, August 1988, Page 30," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, American Educational Trust, 1995-1999. <http://www.wrmea.com/backissues/0888/8808030.htm>; accessed June 19, 2004.

¹⁶ Bill, 127.

¹⁷ Cf. James F. Goode, *The United States and Iran, 1946-51: The Diplomacy of Neglect*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

¹⁸ Bill, 127.

¹⁹ For example under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. *Ibid.*, 152-153.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 159-160.

²¹ The conference room was equipped with headsets for simultaneous translation between Farsi and English.

²² Earlier it was mentioned that we did not receive the Iranian papers until the day of the conference. To be more precise, we never did receive a copy of the first paper, and copies of the other papers were distributed immediately before their deliveries. Another surprise was a slight change in the expected order of our group's presentations. I was anticipating giving a paper introducing the other papers in our group, but a quirk in Mr. Abtahi's own particular schedule omitted my paper—and thus I ended up giving it at the end of the conference as a type of summary. I do not mention these matters here as complaints, but to point out the dynamic and flow of the day, including our surprise at how the Iranian papers unfolded.

²³ The Iranian Muslim papers seem to have been titled—and indeed composed—in juxtaposition with the corresponding U.S. Christians papers.

²⁴ A 40-minute discussion followed each pair of papers.

²⁵ I had mentioned our desire in my own summary paper.

²⁶ James Barr, *Fundamentalism*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977, 1, 338.

²⁷ Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983, 22.

²⁸ Michael Youssef, *Revolt Against Modernity: Muslim Zealots and the West*. Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East, Vol. XXXIX. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985.

²⁹ Harriet A. Harris, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals*. Oxford Theological Monographs, ed. comm., J. Day, et al. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, 13-14.

³⁰ David Kerr, "Christianity and Islam: 'Clash of Civilizations' or 'Community of Reconciliation'?" Questions for Christian-Muslim Studies" *Studies in World Christianity* 8.1, 2002, 93-94.

³¹ Timothy C. Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002, 16-17.

³² J.I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958 (Reprinted ed., 1988), 22.

³³ Tennent, 241.

³⁴ Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996, 171-187.

³⁵ Ayelet Savyon, "The Call for Islamic Protestantism: Dr. Hashem Aghajari's Speech and Subsequent Death Sentence" *MEMRI (Middle East Media Research Institute)* Dec 2, 2002, Special Dispatch Series - No. 445. <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=countries&Area=iran&ID=SP44502>; accessed June 19, 2004.

³⁶ Tennent, 26.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 239-240.

³⁸ Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue*. Faith Meets Faith Series, gen. ed., Paul F. Knitter. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991, 3. Griffiths calls this "The Principle of the Necessity of Interreligious Apologetics," or "the NOIA principle."

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15-16.