

# Dialogue as a Contributor in Developing Civil Society

David W. Shenk

Ibrahim appeared at our door. “Hodi” he called, as my wife, Grace, poured spicy black tea. He was a student in the Russian High School the Soviets were building and in our English class in Mogadishu, Somalia. The Russian presence meant that atheism intermingled with Islam in surprising ways. As he took a chair, Ibrahim posed his question. “I want to believe in God, but I do not want to be a Muslim. The Muslims are very religious, but their religion does not help civil society develop. Look at Somalia. All students are pushed to learn Arabic because the Qur’an is in Arabic.”

## Faith for the Secular Man

This conversation happened when our family had newly arrived in Mogadishu. I was in my mid-twenties and seeking to understand why the Muslim people we had come to serve seemed to have minimal expectations for a hopeful future. The development hype was mostly originating from the international community, not the Muslims who lived around Mogadishu. It was in that context that I discovered Lesslie Newbigin. His book, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*,<sup>1</sup> spoke clearly of the interface between the earthiness of the gospel and the religiosity of Islam. The broken bread and poured out wine are earthy symbols of life eternal. Newbigin observed that hopeful development commitments take root in a culture whenever the gospel is known, but development does not happen where there is no hope. Newbigin wrote from the perspective of a missionary in India; I was writing from the questions of a young missionary among Muslims in Africa.

Newbigin was very formative for me. I began to understand that the gospel planted seeds of hope in cultures wherever it is proclaimed. And that hope is an empowering reality. This article will look at the gift of the gospel in contributing to a healthy civil society. It will then view the role of the church in developing civil society in a pluralistic world, with several examples of the church faithfully doing such.

## Principles of Dialogue

A year before our arrival in Somalia, the director of the Mennonite mission was martyred by an imam who thought he was defending the will of God. Coming forth from that tragedy some students hoped that the presence of the mission would sow seeds of respectful discourse and relationships within the nation. It seemed to me that dialogue for trust-building would be helpful. That

was the hope of our team. However, we were troubled when the voices of militants were also sometimes encouraged. We therefore focused on building social tolerance. This essay is a description of some of those efforts.

Three principles are viewed by influence makers as a commitment to cultivating civil relations. In our ministry of peacemaking these three principles are found in 1 Peter 3:15.

- Set apart Christ as Lord
- Answer all questions people ask
- Do this gently and with respect

Authentic healing and forgiveness needs to undergird these three principles. Here is where Christ offers special grace. We will share several examples of civil society being touched by forgiveness.

When we moved to Kenya from Somalia, I was invited to teach world religions in the Kenyatta College of the University of Nairobi. Growing out of that experience Badru Kateregga became my friend. Out of that friendship we decided to write a book that would model approaches to dialogue. That book was organized very simply with twelve chapters confessing the Muslim commitments and then twelve chapters sharing the Christian commitments. Each chapter was followed by a short response. The purpose of this confession of faith was to build understanding and respect. The title of the book is *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*.<sup>2</sup> Christians liked the book because they felt their faith was well represented. Muslims liked the book because they felt their commitments were well represented. And what surprised us was how well this book was used in a variety of settings to develop civil, respectful society.

## Dialogue in Kosovo

In due course the Dialogue became

significant in developing approaches to dialogue in Kosovo. That was true of other venues as well such as Turkey. Being engaged at the Kenyatta University opened doors for several significant engagements, one of which was a fairly robust relationship with the Kosovo situation. Kosovo was seeking the way forward after several years of conflict.

The country of Kosovo was deeply divided between Christian, Orthodox, and Muslim communities. However, there were both Muslim and Christian leaders who did their best to build reconciling relationships between Muslims and Christians. These peacemaking leaders decided to join hands together to build bridges of understanding. They felt the Kateregga/Shenk *Dialogue* would be helpful, so decided to hold an event to further deepen the commitment for civil society. They rented the largest hall in Kosovo, which accommodated seven hundred people. I am told that all of the key Christian and Muslim leaders were present for that event.

The commitment was to meet one another in dialogue. The overall theme of the evening was peacemaking. It was a transformational event where for the first time in their lives Christians and Muslims had listened to one another and shared with one another the essence of their faith. This was an example of meeting one another at the faith level. The Muslim presenter focused on the peace of Islam; my presentation was forgiveness through the cross of Christ. This happened at the time when Kosovo was attempting to develop a constitution and the big question was whether this was to become an Islamic state or a secular-pluralist state.

A year after the first dialogue the church and Muslim leaders called for a second dialogue, this time in the university community. They closed the university for the afternoon so that all faculty and students could

participate. They asked me to do a presentation on faith and freedom. The critical issue remained whether Kosovo would be an Islamic state or a pluralist state. I built my presentation on Genesis 1:26–27 where we read that God created Adam and Eve in his own image. How should we relate to each other if we believe that we are created in God's image? Islam does not say that. It is in the revelation within the Torah or the Psalms or the gospel that God reveals that we are created in His image.<sup>3</sup>

I am told that for the next three weeks the university was, in various ways, discussing that surprising and revolutionary idea that we are created in God's image. So the question was, how will Kosovo develop their constitution if they are going to accept that we are created in God's image? We thank God for the theologians and the philosophers as they joined together while agreeing to accept the biblical commitment that we are created in God's image. The issues were enormous.

The constitution says that in Kosovo everyone will be free to choose. It is important to understand how important scripture is in developing foundations in a country like Kosovo. I decided to base my presentations on the scripture portions in the Bible that the Qur'an declares to be revealed by God. We recognize that the Qur'an describes Christians as people of the Book and as people who have been entrusted with the responsibility of making these scriptures known.

I entered into this exchange in Kosovo by confessing clearly that I am a person of the Book and I am formed by the Book. In my dialogical engagements with Muslims I try to stay very centered in the biblical scriptures. And that is a stepping-stone to Jesus. We welcome the kind of collegial dialogues that we have experienced in Kosovo but it is not always that way. Some of the Muslim communities that we encounter are hostile. We need to develop bridges of understanding with hostile communities in that case. How do we do that?<sup>4</sup>

### Peacemaking in Java

Let me share from Central Indonesia where militant ideologies were creating much grief within the Christian communities through a jihadist spirit. Christian peacemakers and Muslim peacemakers were working together in an attempt to build bridges. One of the pastors decided that the only helpful step forward was to develop a

trusting relationship with the militants. He climbed the hill to the Muslim center and when he arrived the imam wondered, "Who are you?" The pastor said, "I am a pastor." The imam verbally threatened the pastor and then said, "What do you want?" The pastor responded, "A cup of tea." So the imam and the pastor had a cup of tea together. The next week the pastor returned for another cup of tea. For two years every week the pastor climbed the hill for another cup of tea.<sup>5</sup>

After two years the pastor invited the imam to join a group of pastors going to Banda Aceh. The invitation was for both Muslims and Christians to join hands in constructing a school. The pastor and the imam slept in the same room, which showed that their trust had deepened. One evening the imam wept. He said he was shedding tears because he was remembering ways Christians had suffered under the hands of their Muslim neighbors. The pastor admitted that there were some places in Indonesia where Christians also threatened their neighbors. Now the pastor and the imam work together to encourage peace between their two communities.

After the feast at the conclusion of the construction project, the peacemaking committee gave the commander a copy of *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*. The imam was delighted and, in fact, wept for he said, "If Christians and Muslims would practice the spirit in this dialogue all of Indonesia would be transformed." He ordered fifty copies of the *Dialogue* to distribute to all the Muslim militia leaders across Indonesia. I asked Pastor Hartono how he explained the dramatic transformation within civil society. He said, "Lots of cups of tea! And the Holy Spirit."

### Surprising Invitation by the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)

These are some examples of the Christian community stepping forward to encourage civil discourse and to bring about the development of civil society by talking together respectfully and working for community "upbuilding." A remarkable development in that direction was the annual meeting of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). The leadership decided to make a copy of the Kateregga/Shenk *Dialogue* available for the approximately ten thousand people present. It was an encouraging experience to see the moderators of the

conference receiving their free copies of the *Dialogue*. The leaders explained that Muslims and Christians have not been doing very well in encouraging the spirit of tolerance and dialogue. They hoped that these *Dialogues* would foster better understanding between the Christians and Muslims. It was delightful seeing children being encouraged to take one or several *Dialogues* to give to their parents and friends. For three days we were privileged to distribute 2,250 copies of the book. Kateregga and I have been grateful for how widely the *Dialogue* has been used to encourage developing civil society.

### Dialogue in Kampala


The *Dialogue* book is an introduction to a different way of speaking to one another. A couple years ago Kateregga invited me to join him in his home city of Kampala for a celebration of the *Dialogue* which had been around for some forty years. A thousand people turned out for this celebration that included many speeches. All of them were about the importance of tolerance and dialogue. Knowing that the Kampala region had been engaged in a variety of discourses that have not been civil, we decided to particularly recommit ourselves to peacemaking as exemplified in this book.

When I spoke at this gathering to celebrate the *Dialogue* I asked, "Why did you invite me and Kateregga to come for this very wonderful event?" They said "because it is very unusual for a Christian and a Muslim to become good friends, so we invited you to come. Academically, you are okay but more important is the fact that you are friends and so that is why we invited you." I said, "Thank you. I want to share something with you. I was born in Tanzania just across the bay from where we are tonight and that is my roots. One day a man, the Man from Galilee appeared to me and he said, "Follow me." I heard that call and I am living within that call."

Then Kateregga responded in a concluding statement, "David, we affirm your decision to follow the Man from Galilee. However, not all of us have made that commitment. Nevertheless, we extend tolerance to all who choose other commitments. And we maintain a lively dialogue with all the citizens of Uganda and the city of Kampala. We believe all faiths should be welcomed and all communities of faith engage one another in the quest for truth."

## Postscript

In 1999, sixty Somalis and friends of the Somalia Mennonite Mission met at Eastern Mennonite Missions in Salunga, Pennsylvania to share remembrances. The Somalis sought forgiveness for the death of Merlin Grove, who was killed by a radical cleric in 1962. We sought forgiveness for ways the Mennonites had in various ways been unkind or wrongful in their relations to the Somali people.

As we received and extended forgiveness we sensed in special ways that Jesus, whom we all confess as Messiah, was healing and recreating us as friends. We were experiencing something of what Jesus meant when he said to his disciples that he is the Way. We pray that all who gathered will become participants in Christ's love. 

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## Notes

1. Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: SCM, 1966).
2. Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk, *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011).
3. Genesis 1:26.
4. Genesis 26:16–22.
5. Agus Suyanto and Paulus Hartono, *The Radical Muslim and Mennonite: A Muslim-Christian Encounter for Peace in Indonesia* (Pustaka Muria, 2015).
6. In the Muslim scriptures Jesus is referred to as Messiah (*Surat All-Imram* [3] ayah 45).