

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

## ***Theological Foundations***

(Not for Publication without Consultation with the Writer)

David W. Shenk

Last November I was invited to present two public lectures at the Asia Pacific Cultural Studies Institute (APCSI) sponsored by the Shanghai Second Polytechnic University. These presentations were two of six in a one-day marathon on the theme: Inter-Civilization Peacemaking. I was warned that the university is officially atheistic and anti-religious. Avoid God-talk and religion! So I told stories. I observed that civilizations are formed by meta-narratives, for meta-narratives form the world view of societies.

The meta-narrative is the great story. This is the narrative that a society accepts as its story because it provides a plausible answer to the ultimate question: what is the meaning of life? World view is at the core, the center of culture, societies, and civilizations. Therefore authentic peacemaking between civilizations is fundamentally an engagement at the meta-narrative level. The narrative does not have to be long. It is often simple and brief. Sometimes it is the history of a people. But the narrative forms world view and civilizations.

### **Meta-Narratives Form World Views**

I presented four meta-narratives that form understandings in regard to the fundamental question: who am I? These are examples of meta-narrative forming world view and influencing the value systems of civilizations. These narratives form understanding of personal and communal peace. Here are the four meta-narratives.

The Kikuyu of Kenya among whom I have lived for some years said that the primal Kikuyu couple, Mumbi and Bumbi, came from the Mugumu (fig) tree. What does that narrative say about humanity? It says we are only in continuity with nature and that each tribe on earth has a different origin. That narrative can become the seed that feeds tribalism and racism. It also means that people carry no special responsibility for the well being or development of nature for they have come from nature and are one with nature.

Mahatma Gandhi recommended the *Bhagavad Gita* as the most profound Hindu scripture. That has perplexed me for the *Gita* does not espouse non-violence. The essence of the world view is that all apparent phenomena, including creation, are brahman. We have originated from brahman and we return to brahman.

Here is the narrative. Arjuna is leading his army to war. He is distressed because this is an inter-nicene war; he will be killing relatives. Then his eyes are opened to see that Krishna, his charioteer, is an incarnation of the god of moral order, Vishnu. Krishna as spokesperson for Vishnu informs Arjuna that the supreme good is to obey the law of caste. Since Arjuna is of the warrior Kshatriya caste, his duty is to execute wars. So not to kill when the time of battle has come would be bad karma. Furthermore since all is brahman and every act is brahman there is no qualitative difference between killing and not killing. In any event the perception of personhood is illusion for it is only the atman, the soul within, that is eternal. Killing simply hastens the process of reincarnation of the atman. Nevertheless in Arjuna's extremity if he feels a need for divine assistance, he should choose whatever god he wishes, and worship that god. That is too brief, yet it is the essential themes of the *Gita* meta-narrative.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Song of God, Bhagavad-Gita*, Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isnerwood, transl (New York: New American Library, 1951),

The *Gita* meta-narrative is quite popular beyond Hindu societies because it provides a philosophical foundation for relativism: your society has the authority to determine right and wrong and each of us has the privilege of choosing our god; since all is brahman all religions, deeds, and gods are equally true. Gandhi's conviction was that caste relativism is the most authentic way to maintain peace in a pluralist nation; I think that is the reason he commended the *Gita*. This meta-narrative provides a philosophical justification for moral and philosophical relativism as the authentic way to relate to a pluralistic world.

An alternative is the Darwinian evolution of the species narrative; humanity has evolved from primal chemical reactions. The natural forces that drive the whole evolutionary process is survival of the fittest. What happens when a civilization is formed by that narrative? I have lived in the former Soviet Union for some years, and this meta-narrative formed a whole culture with the premise that people are only biological creatures and the survival of the fittest when applied to human societies meant that might makes right. So if under Lenin and Stalin in their proletarian revolution to establish utopia on earth a hundred million people died, it did not matter for these people were only intelligent monkeys. And the enthronement of science as the ultimate authority meant that there was no way to critique the system for it was founded upon so called scientific truth.

Then there is the Biblical meta-narrative: God created Adam and Eve in his own image and God loved them and longed that they will experience full and abundant life. He enters the Garden when they turn away from him; within history we discern the drama of God in his love questioning us in our lostness. What happens when a civilization is salted by that narrative? One development, if the narrative is taken seriously, is that we recognize that there is only one humanity. We are all equally created in God's image. It means that each person has dignity and

eternal worth. We need to respect and love one another in the same spirit that God exemplifies in his love for us.

I presented these four brief meta-narratives in regard to who we are at the APCSI. Then I invited the 400 present to cluster in groups and discuss together the implications for inter-civilization peacemaking and reconciliation of these different narratives. The interaction was electric with energetic engagement. Then came the question time: How do you avoid one meta-narrative disparaging and imperializing other meta-narratives? Profound question! How do we as ambassadors of Christ in our pluralistic world respond to that question? And how does our response speak to peacemaking in our pluralistic world? The Kikuyu, Gita, Darwinian, and Biblical narratives in regard to origins cannot be equally true. That is unless we accept the Gita premise that all deeds and beliefs are equally true. Each of these meta-narratives form respective understandings of who we are. Each is profoundly relevant to the theme of inter-civilization relationships. As I see it concern for reconciliation in a pluralist world is not apparent in the Kikuyu, *Gita*, or Darwinian meta-narratives.

### **Jesus and Other Meta-Narratives**

Our understanding of what it means to be human is foundational to any commitments to peacemaking or reconciliation. However, these four encapsulated meta-narratives demonstrate that those foundations diverge in most substantial ways. These four meta-narrative vignettes demonstrate indeed that the call of Christ to be ambassadors of reconciliation happens within a pluralistic world of alternative visions of what it means to be human. The issues are not trivial. Wars are fought over these differences.

Exploring meta-narratives that are alternatives to the Gospel of Jesus Christ can help to clarify the nature of the Christian calling in our pluralist world and refine our understandings and

appreciation of the Gospel of reconciliation. We of course cannot explore all of the viable alternatives. So this presentation is limited in focus. It is a case study, as it were, of a current lively ongoing Christian engagement with Iranian Shi'ite theologians. It describes a journey in inter-religious dialogue for peace-making and reconciliation that I and several other Christian scholars are engaged in as we bear witness to the peace of Christ through dialogical encounter with scholars who embrace the Iranian Shi'ite meta-narrative. The theologies revealed within these different meta-narratives are most pertinent to our considerations of mission and reconciliation.

In our engagement with the Iranians it is evident that there are convergences as well as profound divergences between the Iranian Shi'a peacemaking meta-narrative and that of the Gospel. Of profound significance is the cross, which the Shi'a find incomprehensible. They ponder, how could the Messiah who is anointed with the glory of God suffer crucifixion? Nevertheless in the meeting of the Muslim and Christian meta-narratives, Jesus persists in occupying a central role. This is evident in the May 8, 2006 letter sent by the President of Iran, Mahmood Ahmadi-Nejad, to the then USA President George W. Bush. He writes, about the second coming of the Messiah, and asks, "Will we be given a role to play in the promised world where justice will become universal and Jesus Christ (PBUH) will be present? Will they (the prophets) even accept us?"<sup>2</sup>

### **The Iranian Shi'ite Vision of Peace**

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<sup>2</sup> Mahmood Ahmadi-Nejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Letter to Mr. George Bush, President of the United States of America, 5/8/2006.

Only a couple weeks ago, I have been in Iran for my third visit. The venue was the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, and the theme was peace and justice, very pertinent to the concerns of our discussions these days.

Of course the narrative commences with the Muslim prophet Muhammad, who claimed that the angel Gabriel met him in a cave at Mount Hira near Mecca on the night of power. The Qur'an exclaims:

Lo! he revealed it on the Night of Power. Ah what will convey unto thee what the Night of Power is? The Night of power is better than a thousand months.<sup>3</sup>

Muslims believe that the powerful and eternal Word of God has become a book; the book is the Arabic Qur'an. These revelations of portion by portion of the Qur'an came to Mohammad from time to time. The pathos in all of this was that the Meccans largely rejected his message. They were vigorously polytheistic, with some 360 gods housed within the sacred polytheistic shrine known as the Ka'aba. Within that shrine resided the famous black stone. After his wife Khadija died, Muhammad was in despair, but God intervened miraculously sending a night-time horse (Buraq) who whisked him from Mecca to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, and then up into the seventh heaven. This miraculous night journey right into the heart of Jewish sacred history (Al-Aqsa) and into the presence of God was an enormous accolade upon his prophetic mission.<sup>4</sup>

### ***The Hijrah and the Dar al Islam***

That affirmation was reinforced shortly thereafter when emissaries came from Medina 400 kilometers north of Mecca to implore Muhammad to come to their city and become not only their prophet, but also their statesman. With gratitude Muhammad accepted that invitation, and with his band of disciples commenced a three-week secret migration from Mecca to Medina.

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<sup>3</sup> Qur'an: Qadr: 97:1-3.

<sup>4</sup> Qur'an: Bani Israil: 17:1.

This migration is the Hijrah. This is the event that defines the beginning of the Muslim era. That is remarkable. The era does not begin with the birth of Muhammad in 570 A.D. or the beginning of revelations in 610 A.D.; it begins with the Hijrah.

Why is the Hijrah so significant? Because according to the Muslims this event is one of the truly great watersheds in history. For the first time a prophet of God acquired the instruments of political and military power that enabled him to put in place a political and constitutional order that can potentially extend the rule of God throughout the earth. Moses tried to do so, but only managed to put in place a political order for Israel. Jesus did not even try to develop a political order. But the Hijrah provided Mohammad the opportunity to combine the function of prophet and statesman in such an effective manner that a political and religious order was established that can potentially extend to the whole world.

In Medina Muhammad formed the embryonic Dar al Islam, territory governed by Islamic spiritual and political authority. Minority groups such as Jews and Christians were to be protected as *dhimmi*, with freedom of worship but also with restrictions. There would be peace between the Muslims and dhimmi, as long as the dhimmi respected Muslim rule. When the Jews of Medina challenged Muslim supremacy, they were dealt with forthrightly. That is in compliance with Qur'anic commands on dealing with those who threaten the integrity of the ummah.

The theology derived from the Hijrah meta-narrative had little or even no space for the cross. The ultimate evidence that Muhammad was the prophet of God was the acquisition of political power. In Medina Jews chided Muhammad for believing that Jesus was the Messiah, because they had crucified him, and the Messiah could not be crucified. The Qur'anic rejoinder was that Jesus never was crucified. He was rescued from the cross and the Jews crucified only

an illusion of the Messiah.<sup>5</sup> In fact the Messiah was raised into the heavens to return again at the end of the age to complete his mission.<sup>6</sup>

Then the wars began with the Meccans. In one battle Muhammad was wounded and about seventy Muslims killed. The Qur'an assesses this defeat as a result of the Muslims not sufficiently obeying Muhammad, for God would never permit the faithful umma to experience defeat. Furthermore those who died as martyrs fighting for the defense of Islam were assured the pleasures of paradise.<sup>7</sup> Before long the perception developed of a world divided into two regions. The region of peace (Dar al Islam) was governed by the Muslims. The regions of war (Dar al Harb) were those territories not yet brought under Islamic authority. There was also the Dar al Ahd, regions of the covenant, who were peoples who were not Muslim but in peace with the Muslims.

Within eight years the Meccan adversaries had been defeated and they sued for peace. The Muslims and the polytheistic Meccans made a peace treaty and thereafter Muhammad entered Mecca leading 10,000 soldiers, many on horses. He magnanimously forgave the Meccans who had opposed him for some 20 years, but ordered the death of three women who made sport of him as he entered the city. He then went to the Ka'aba and destroyed all the idols and established the true faith of Islam with the worship of only Allah. He announced, "Truth hath come and falsehood hath vanished away!"<sup>8</sup> Finally the peace of Islam had triumphed over the regions of war that Meccan polytheism had enshrined.

### ***The Mahdi and the Iranian Shi'a***

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<sup>5</sup> Qur'an: 4:157

<sup>6</sup> Qur'an: Ali Imran: 3:55-8; 43:61

<sup>7</sup> Qur'an: Ali Imran: 3:134-200

<sup>8</sup> Qur'an: Bani Israel: 17:81.



The Iranian Islamic revolution is formed by the triumphalism of the meta-narrative of the Hijrah. It is also formed by the distinctive Iranian Shi'a meta-narrative which has formed the Mahdist eschatology of Iranian theology. The historical background for Iranian Mahdism is essential to understanding the Iranian Islamic revolution and its peacemaking quest. The Shi'a branch of the Muslim movement believe that the head of the community should be the descendent of Muhammad through his daughter, Fatima, and her husband, Ali. This was disputed by the mainstream Sunni who believed that the leader should be chosen by consensus of the theologians (*'ulama*).

The conflict eventually led to a civil war and Ali was killed. Later, even his son Husayn was treacherously assassinated. These tragedies have implanted within Shi'a Islam more openness to themes of redemptive suffering than is true of Sunni Islam. This theme might open Shi'a to a more sympathetic consideration of the crucifixion of Jesus, than is true of the Sunni whose historical narrative is more triumphal. Within the Shi'a communities the head of the community is a descendant of Muhammad, he is the Imam, the infallible leader. There are several branches of Shi'a Islam; the largest is the Ithna 'ashari (twelver) who comprise the Iranian Shi'a community.

The Iranian Shi'a exegete several Hadith (Traditions) to say that Muhammad prophesied that there would be only twelve Imams and then the Mahdi (Savior) would come who would bring peace and Islamic rule throughout the world. True to that prophesy, in 869 AD (255 AH) the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad ibn Hasan ibn 'Ali, was born. Alas, at the age of five he disappeared. So for about 12 centuries the Ithna 'ashari have not had an Imam. This community believes that the twelfth imam disappeared because people were in rebellion against the peace of Islam that he was promulgating.

However, the Occultation of Imam Muhammad prevails. The function of the Ayatollahs is to tune into his Occultation and lead society in ways that are in harmony with his spirit. When they are successful in developing the perfect Muslim society, the Twelfth Imam will return to extend the peace of Islam throughout the world. He will return with Jesus who will defer to his leadership as they work together in bringing about universal peace and justice. In some Hadith Jesus leads an army of angels who slay those who oppose Islam while the Mahdi leads in prayers and spiritual affairs. Jesus and the Mahdi will prepare the world for the final judgment and the end of the world.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Jesus and the Mahdi Return in Triumphant Power***

The meta-narratives of the Hijrah and the Mahdi form the world view of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. That was obvious in the 21 sermons I heard on Mahdism at a convocation of several thousand Iranian clerics in Tehran, September, 2006. When I saw an announcement of this gathering, I noticed that one of the themes for invited papers was Messianic Hope in Christianity. My offer to present on the Christian theme was accepted. So for two days I and four other Christian invitees were immersed in Mahdism. Especially noteworthy was hearing President Ahmadi-Nejad's opening address and a passionate closing sermon by Ayatollah Mesbahe Yazdi who is spiritual advisor to the Iranian nation.

There was excited expectancy about the appearance of Jesus with the Mahdi to bring universal Islamic peace. In the foyer a video announced, "Do you know – Jesus Christ is coming soon? The Mahdi right after that!" In fact some months before the conference President Ahmedinejad had sent a letter to President Bush inviting dialogue on international issues. He urged that they begin conversations referencing their mutual respect for the prophets and their

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<sup>9</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, *A history of Islamic Societies*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 94-96.

message of justice. Then he made this rather astonishing statement in regard to the second coming of Jesus Christ, “Will we be given a role to play in the promised world where justice will become universal and Jesus Christ (PBUH) will be present? Will they (the prophets) even accept us?”<sup>10</sup>

The theologians believe they are approaching the perfection that is essential for the Mahdi to return. They have put in place a political order that emulates that of Muhammad in Medina and his triumphant return to Mecca. The beloved leader of the revolution, Imam Khomeini, fled the rule of the infidels in Iran under the Shah’s regime, just as Muhammad fled the infidelity of Mecca. Then, like Muhammad, in due course, the Shah returned to Iran in peace and victory over the infidel regime. Under his leadership a political and religious system has been developed that emulates Muhammad’s nascent Dar al Islam. The Great Leader presides at the pinnacle of power; when the Mahdi returns the systems are in place for him to step into the center of power and from the apex of the political pyramid, he will exert his rule of peace throughout Iran and to the ends of the earth. Jesus will be his associate.

It is necessary for Iran to be unequivocally committed to justice. That is the basis of their opposition to Israel, for that nation is founded upon injustice. There can, therefore, be no equivocation on the necessity for the State of Israel to be dismantled. The Jews may live among the Muslims in peace, but a state based upon injustice will never be tolerated by the Mahdi. The victory of Hizbullah over the Israeli invasion of Lebanon just prior to our gathering was evidence of the Mahdi’s favor upon Iran and her allies. However, if in the struggle for justice, the forces of antichrist were to attack Iran and the blood of martyrs were to flow, that would hasten the coming of the Mahdi, for he and Jesus would most certainly intervene to save the Islamic Revolution.

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<sup>10</sup> Letter to President Bush from President Ahmedinejad, May 8, 2006.

The messages revealed concern about the role of alternative communities within the reign of Islamic peace that Jesus and the Mahdi will extend throughout the world. The weight of opinion was that they would be permitted to live but with restrictions. That debate is about the eschatological future. The debate also applies to the current situation, for the goal of the Iranian Revolution is to bring all areas of society into full convergence with the ultimate goals of the Mahdi and the rule that he intends to establish.

### **Peace and Reconciliation in Jesus the Messiah**

It is in that context that I was invited to speak on the peace and reconciliation of Jesus. When I took the podium, I said, “I am committed to building peacemaking bridges between Christians and Muslims. Your invitation to me to speak reveals that you likewise are committed to peacemaking. I often speak to groups of Christian leaders. May I take your greetings of peace to Christian leaders? If so wave your hands in greeting.”

I well nigh wept as I saw hundreds and hundreds of hands waving above the turbaned heads of clerics and ayatollahs as they enthusiastically sent their greetings to Christian leaders wherever I go.

How does a disciple of Jesus present the Gospel of peace and reconciliation within a context that enthusiastically embraces an alternative world view formed by the narratives of Hijrah and Mahdism, meta-narratives that would resist any peacemaking overtures with forces of injustice or perceived enemies. Are there areas of convergence, are there signs within the Shi’a narrative that might nudge an openness to considering the Jesus meta-narrative? That was preeminent in my mind as I prepared my presentation. Also I was keenly aware that the ministry of Jesus happened within a context of oppression, injustice, polarization, and conflict, not unlike the dangerously conflictual circumstances of the Middle East region today.

Here is an adaptation of the presentation on Jesus at that convocation. The oral presentation was an abbreviation of the written essay that was translated and published. I am sharing it here, because it is an example of an attempt to bear witness to the reconciliation in Christ within our pluralist world and with contextual sensitivities

### ***Jesus and the Prophets***

In President Ahmadi-Nejad's letter to the US President, he observed that both men believe in the prophets and the scriptures. That reality needs to be foundational to reconciliatory peacemaking between Christians and Muslims. Both communities believe that Jesus the Messiah fulfills the previous scriptures that Christians refer to as the Old Testament.<sup>11</sup> The Torah, the Psalms, and the writings of other Old Testament prophets anticipated the coming of the Messiah who would establish God's kingdom of justice, peace, and reconciliation for all nations. Especially after Israel's monarchy was overthrown and the people taken into exile this earnest hope was deepened for the Messiah who would establish peace and justice.<sup>12</sup>

The prophet Isaiah was one voice proclaiming Messianic hope.

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse.<sup>13</sup>

From his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

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<sup>11</sup> Qur'an: Suratul Maida 5:49; Bible Luke 24:44.

<sup>12</sup> In 722 B.C. the Northern Kingdom, Israel, was taken into exile by the Assyrians. In 586 B.C. the Southern Kingdom, Judah, was exiled by the Babylonians.

<sup>13</sup> Jesse is the father of King David. The dynasty of kings coming from David's line was first curtailed and then actually overthrown. So only a stump remained of the tree of David's kingly dynasty.

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—

The Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,

The Spirit of counsel and power,

The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord—

And he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,

Or decide by what he hears with his ears;

But with righteousness he will judge the needy,

With justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;

With the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked,

Righteousness will be his belt

And faithfulness the sash around his waist....

They will neither hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain,

For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord

As the waters cover the sea.

In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples;

The nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.<sup>14</sup>

The Prophet Micah likewise encouraged the people with this Messianic expectation.

He will judge between many peoples

And will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.

They will beat their swords into plowshares

And their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation,

Nor will they train for war anymore.

Every man will sit under his own vine

And under his own fig tree,

And no one will make them afraid,

For the Lord Almighty has spoken.<sup>15</sup>

As the Exile continued, there was a deepening awareness that the people of the covenant (Israel) were called to be a blessing to the nations within their experience of exile.<sup>16</sup> Although scattered in nations far from their homeland, God promised, “I will also make you a light for the

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<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 11:1- 5; 9 - 10.

<sup>15</sup> Micah 4:3-4.

<sup>16</sup> Bright, John, *The Kingdom of God, the Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 127-155

Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”<sup>17</sup> Is it possible that Israel in Diaspora, with no political or military power and no territorial possession, were more fruitful in their calling to be a blessing and light to the nations, than was true when they were an independent monarchy occupying the land of Canaan with the Temple system as the center of their worship? If that is true, then should not all those who lay claim to the faith of Abraham likewise consider the ways that power and territory might distort the calling to be a people of peace and reconciliation among the nations?

In Israel’s suffering, God revealed that they were called to be God’s Suffering Servant, and in the ministry of suffering be a healing witness among the nations.<sup>18</sup> This is a complete revolution in theological thought—that in suffering the kingdom of God prevails! In later centuries the church saw this vision of the Suffering Servant as a prophetic anticipation of the Messiah and his sufferings. A prophet of the Exile proclaimed in regard to the Suffering Servant, “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”<sup>19</sup>

### **The Coming of the Messiah**

After 70 years in Exile, some of Israel was permitted to return to Canaan. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah they rebuilt the Temple and Jerusalem. At the time when the Messiah was born, 500,000 lived in the regions around Jerusalem, and 3.5 million were in Diaspora, scattered among the nations.<sup>20</sup> Messianic expectation became very intense. All

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<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 49:6.

<sup>18</sup> Bright, 148-153.

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah 53:5.

<sup>20</sup> Donald Kraybill, *The Upside Down Kingdom*, (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1978), 66.



believed that the Messiah born of David's line would come soon and establish God's eternal kingdom of justice and peace.

It is in that context that Jesus the Messiah was born to the Virgin Mary, who was a descendant of David's line. The angel Gabriel announced to Mary concerning the son she will bear, "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."<sup>21</sup>

In joy she sang a song. Here are some excerpts that highlight peace and justice themes in her song:

My soul glorifies the Lord

And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

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He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones

But has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things

But sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

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<sup>21</sup> Luke 1:32-33.

Remembering to be merciful

To Abraham and his descendents forever,

Even as he said to our fathers.<sup>22</sup>

The Messiah's birth was surprisingly unobtrusive; the Gospel describes his first bed as a manger in a cattle stall. When King Herod sought to take his life, the young child became a refugee in Egypt. In his youth and young adulthood he worked as a carpenter in Nazareth.

This is astonishing for the Gospel accounts describe the Messiah as the One in whom the Word of God has become human. Muslims believe that in Islam the powerful Word has become a book, the Arabic Qur'an. In Jesus the Messiah we meet the powerful Word becoming human. "The Word became human, and lives among us!"<sup>23</sup> In the Messiah the powerful Word through whom God creates and sustains the universe has become the living Word who lives with us. This Word suffers with us and because of us. He is born in a manger – he becomes a refugee – he partakes in our sufferings!

### ***The Messiah and the Kingdom of God***

At the age of 30 Jesus commenced his public ministry. On the Sabbath day, as was his custom, he went to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. The leader gave him a scroll to read from, and he read from the Prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

Because he has anointed me

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<sup>22</sup> Luke 1:46-47; 51-55.

<sup>23</sup> John 1:14.

To preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

And recovery of sight for the blind,

To release the oppressed,

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.<sup>24</sup>

Then he sat down and preached his first sermon. It was one sentence, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."<sup>25</sup> The congregation was astonished. They believed that this prophecy is about the reign of God that would be inaugurated when the Messiah comes!<sup>26</sup> In his one sentence sermon Jesus was announcing that he is indeed the Messiah and that in his mission the kingdom of God was fulfilled. The people were delighted!

Then the mood turned angry, because Jesus said that outsiders like the Syrians would enter the kingdom more readily than the people in the synagogue. The worshippers that Sabbath morning considered themselves to be very righteous and religious. They were infuriated when Jesus warned that people they considered to be outsiders and enemies would enter the kingdom while they would remain outside because of their lack of faith. In fury they tried to throw Jesus over a cliff. They rejected any thought that in the mission of Jesus Jews and Gentiles might become reconciled.

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<sup>24</sup> Luke 4:18-19.

<sup>25</sup> Luke 4:21.

<sup>26</sup> Kraybill, 104-105.

Thus began the public ministry of Jesus the Messiah. In all he said and did, he demonstrated that he was indeed the presence of the kingdom of God among us.<sup>27</sup> All who were sick, crippled, blind, or deaf, who came to him, he healed. He cast out demons. He fed the hungry miraculously, as when he broke and multiplied five loaves of bread and two fish, feeding 5,000 men plus women and children. He raised at least two people from the dead. He triumphed over creation, even walking on the water when it was necessary.

Jesus did not work for justice and peace alone. He was committed to forming a community who would carry forward his mission of salvation to the ends of the earth and until the consummation of the kingdom of God in his second coming. So Jesus called twelve men to be his associates; they were representative of the twelve tribes of Israel. This is to say that Jesus viewed the new community that he was forming as a community of reconciliation that was in continuity with Israel, the covenant people of the Old Testament. So for three years of public ministry Jesus the Messiah was committed to forming his twelve disciples as apostles who would lay a solid foundation for the church, a community of reconciliation, after Jesus' earthly ministry came to an end.

The circle of disciples grew into a movement much larger than that of the twelve. The Messiah welcomed sinners and those who were troubled into his community of followers. He invited, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."<sup>28</sup> Many heeded his invitation and became his disciples.

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<sup>27</sup> John H. Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1972),13-18.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 11:28-30.

The Messiah taught with authority and confronted injustice and religious hypocrisy. He proclaimed, “Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisees! (They were religious leaders.) First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”<sup>29</sup>

In his Sermon on the Mount the Messiah described the ethical foundation for the kingdom of God.<sup>30</sup>

Blessed are the poor in spirit

For theirs is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are those who mourn,

For they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,

For they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

For they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,

For they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,

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<sup>29</sup> Matthew 23: 25-26.

<sup>30</sup> Yoder, 34-52.

For they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,

For they will be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.<sup>31</sup>

Jesus also taught about sexual ethics, marriage, integrity, our attitude toward wealth and possessions, forgiveness of our enemies, reconciliation, giving to the poor, prayer, fasting, the relationship of his disciples to the nation and government, and not to worry! He taught about reconciliation. The people observed that "...he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law."<sup>32</sup>

The Messiah declared that his disciples are the salt of the earth. They are light in the darkness. The disciples of Jesus were not called to implement the kingdom of peace and justice with political or military power. Rather they were to be those who transform societies from within, like the salt that makes the food good. This transformation in directions of peace and justice and reconciliation takes place as people's conscience is awakened. Jesus anticipates that the lives of his disciples will have that kind of transformative influence. His disciples will be people of integrity who always speak the truth. If in the place of business there are several people of integrity, soon their influence begins to transform the entire business into a place where the practices are just and honest.

### ***The Suffering Servant***

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<sup>31</sup> Matthew 5:3-10.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 7:29.

The revolutionary nature of the Messianic age of justice, peace, and reconciliation as inaugurated by Jesus is especially revealed in the final weeks of his earthly ministry. At the height of his popularity the Jews in Galilee attempted to make him their king by force. At that time there was an insurgency known as the Zealots in Galilee fighting against the Roman imperial rule that was especially obnoxious because of the vigorous polytheism of the Romans. Even the Emperor was honored as divine! The Jews hated the Romans. The plan of the Galileans was that Jesus would lead their underground army to victory. In Galilee the Messiah could establish the kingdom of God and then extend its borders to the ends of the world; he would have an army of Zealots at his command.

Jesus the Messiah rejected that invitation forthrightly. Instead he went into the mountains for prayer that night, and thereafter he “resolutely” set his face to go to Jerusalem.<sup>33</sup> He explained to his disciples that in Jerusalem, they would arrest him, “mock him, insult him, spit on him and kill him. On the third day he would rise again.”<sup>34</sup> The disciples objected strongly. They believed that the Messiah could not be crucified!

As Jesus approached the Mount of Olives east of Jerusalem, he mounted a colt. The children were jubilant, and sang, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”<sup>35</sup> The children sang because they were acquainted with a prophecy written by Zechariah 500 years earlier.

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!

Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!

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<sup>33</sup> Luke 9:51.

<sup>34</sup> Luke 18:32-33.

<sup>35</sup> Luke 19:38.

See, your king comes to you,

Righteous and having salvation,

Gentle and riding on a donkey,

On a colt, the foal of a donkey.

I will take away the chariots from Ephraim,

And the war horses from Jerusalem,

And the battle bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations.

His rule will extend from sea to sea

And from the River to the ends of the earth.<sup>36</sup>

Zechariah proclaimed that the kingdom inaugurated by the Messiah would extend among the nations to the ends of the earth. The instruments of war are put away, for this kingdom of peace is voluntarily received. However, as Jesus the Messiah came over the brow of the Mount of Olives and saw Jerusalem below, he wept, because Jerusalem would not receive the peace.

Jesus then descended the Mount and entered the Temple in the center of Jerusalem. Five hundred years earlier the prophet Ezekiel had declared that a day will come when the radiant glory of God that fills the whole earth will enter the Temple from the east and cleanse the temple of all its corruption.<sup>37</sup> As Jesus entered that Temple that day he was declaring that he was a

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<sup>36</sup> Zechariah 9:9-10.

<sup>37</sup> Ezekiel 43: 1-12.



fulfillment of that prophecy; in his person the glory of God was entering the Temple to cleanse it. With his army of singing children he chased away the corrupt merchants who occupied the Temple courts.<sup>38</sup> He overturned their tables with money stacked upon them, and with a whip of cords chased the cattle out of the Temple. The Temple was the center of worship, where Israel made regular pilgrimages. Eighteen thousand priests and associates were required to keep the system working. The whole religious enterprise had become a heavy burden and corrupt. In this bold political non-violent action Jesus was confronting and overturning an unjust and abusive religious-political system.

There is more. The area of the temple that the merchants had occupied was the court of the Gentiles; that is the area for non Jewish worshippers. Jesus declared that the house of God was for all nations; the action of Jesus was to reopen the temple worship for all nations, not just Jews. Jesus not only cleansed the Temple, but enraged the authorities by proclaiming that the Temple would one day be destroyed. (That happened about thirty years later.) There was no need for the Temple of stone in the kingdom he was inaugurating, for the people of God would be the temple of God. And the people of God would indeed be a Temple for all nations!

The authorities were furious, and planned his arrest. One of his disciples, Judas, turned traitor and decided to co-operate with the authorities. Apparently Judas felt that Jesus was carrying his opposition to unjust political-religious systems to a most unreasonable and dangerous extreme. The night of his betrayal by Judas, Jesus had a last supper with his twelve disciples. At that supper Jesus made it clear that Judas would betray him. Then he got up from the table, took a basin of water and towel, and proceeded to wash the feet of each disciple,

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<sup>38</sup> Kraybill, 175-78.

beginning, it seems, with Judas. The Messiah washed the feet of his betrayer! Then he freed him to leave and follow his intentions!

Later that night Jesus was in prayer on the Mount of Olives, when Judas and soldiers came to arrest him. One of the disciples, Peter, took a sword and struck one of the arresting team cutting off his ear. Jesus rebuked Peter saying, “Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.”<sup>39</sup> Jesus touched and healed the stricken ear.

Many accusations were made in his trial. The charges about his cleansing the Temple and predicting its destruction were among the most damaging. He was condemned to be crucified. The Messiah said that he could muster an army of 72,000 angels to deliver him, but he would not.

The next morning Jesus was placed on a cross between two thieves. The Roman authorities put this inscription in three languages above his head: This is Jesus the King of the Jews. People jeered, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”<sup>40</sup> Jesus cried out, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”<sup>41</sup>

Christians believe that in that cry of forgiveness with hands outstretched the soul of the kingdom of God is revealed. Outstretched hands seek to embrace; they invite reconciliation. In the crucifixion of the Messiah the human hate, rebellion, rejection of God, injustice and violent rejection of the kingdom of God are hurled against Jesus. Even Satan and all the demonic powers and the false gods of nature vent their rejection of truth upon Jesus on that cross. So do the political, economic, and religious powers; they all colluded in this crucifixion. In his

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<sup>39</sup> Matthew 26:52.

<sup>40</sup> Luke 23:37.

<sup>41</sup> Luke 23:34.

crucifixion the powers are unmasked, put on public display and their truly rebellious nature is revealed.<sup>42</sup> And how does Jesus respond? He extends forgiveness and triumphs over all powers in his resurrection. Christians believe that in the forgiveness extended in Jesus the Messiah crucified we are invited into the forgiveness, reconciliation and peace of God.<sup>43</sup> In his reconciling embrace the cycle of retributive violence stops, for Christ absorbs the violence and forgives.

### ***The Resurrected Messiah***

Three days after his crucifixion, God raised the Messiah from the dead. In his resurrection Jesus triumphs over the powers. His crucifixion unmask the powers; in his resurrection he triumphs over the powers and goes forth in victory over all the powers that seek to distort and destroy God's kingdom of peace and justice.

In one of his resurrection appearances Jesus met the disciples and said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit." He also commanded them to proclaim the forgiveness of sin.<sup>44</sup> Indeed receiving and extending forgiveness is absolutely central to the peace of Christ. Christ on the cross takes our place. In him the judge of the universe has entered the judgment hall and personally takes our place. Reconciliation at its deepest levels begins with receiving the forgiveness of the One who has taken our place. Furthermore as we receive the gift of forgiveness we are empowered to also extend the grace of forgiveness. Forgiveness is at the heart of authentic reconciliation. As Christ forgave his enemies, so also his followers are invited to receive forgiveness and empowered to

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<sup>42</sup> Colossians 2:15; 2 Corinthians 2:14.

<sup>43</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace, A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 99-166.

<sup>44</sup> John 20:21-22.

extend forgiveness. In that miracle of reciprocal forgiveness, we are gifted with the peace of Christ and the grace of reconciliation

### **The Church a Community of Reconciliation**

Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus met his disciples on a hill in Galilee, and commissioned them, "...Go and make disciples of all nations."<sup>45</sup> Then he ascended into heaven. As the astonished disciples were gazing into the heavens, two angels appeared and said to them, "This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."<sup>46</sup> For the next ten days the disciples fasted and prayed in an upper room in Jerusalem. Then on Pentecost day, when Israel celebrated the first fruit of the harvest, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples. With the empowerment of the Holy Spirit they became witnesses of the gospel of the kingdom just as Jesus had commissioned them to do. Miraculously all languages gathered in Jerusalem on that day heard the Gospel proclaimed in their native tongue; some 13 languages are specifically mentioned! This birthday of the church dramatically demonstrated that the church is a community of reconciliation for all nations; all languages are welcome and heard in the fellowship of believers.

### **The Church and the Eschaton**

The church was born within the context of Jesus the Messiah promising to return again. The mission of those who are committed to Jesus the Messiah is to continue living and proclaiming the peace and justice of the kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated in his life, crucifixion and resurrection. Prior to his crucifixion and resurrection Jesus explained that a

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<sup>45</sup> Matthew 28:19.

<sup>46</sup> Acts 1:11.

witness among the nations to the redemptive and reconciling love of God had eschatological significance. He said, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”<sup>47</sup>

It is for this reason that the faithful church around the world is often recognized as a community who encourages justice, peacemaking, schools, hospitals, agricultural development, freedom, ministries of compassion, reconciliation, and cultural transformation in a humanizing direction, like Mother Theresa’s nuns in Calcutta who minister to the dying in their home for the old and dying. The church seeks to be communities of reconciliation, even with ones enemies. (I acknowledge with sorrow that often the church betrays this calling!)

The faithful church serves as a sign of the kingdom of God with the expectation that Jesus the Messiah will return some day and bring to complete fulfillment the kingdom that he inaugurated. This is to say that the faithful church is a sign of the end. The faithful followers of the Messiah are called to be a sign among the nations of the kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated and that will be fulfilled throughout the earth in his second coming in the eschaton. This confidence gives the church hope to press on celebrating and proclaiming the peace of Christ and the reconciling love of God, even in the midst of overwhelming opposition and anti-justice forces. The promise of the second coming of the Messiah gives confidence that our labor and commitments to peace, justice, and reconciliation is not in vain.

The Apostle John describes the second coming of the Messiah thus, “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him;”<sup>48</sup>...This reveals that the kingdom that will be consummated at the end of human history breaks into human

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<sup>47</sup> Matthew 24:14.

<sup>48</sup> Revelation 1:7.

experience through the transforming power of the redemptive, suffering, reconciling love revealed in the crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah. His triumphal second coming is an extension of the reconciling embrace of his wounded hands in his crucifixion.

In his second coming the Messiah's wrath will also be revealed, just as he expressed anger against injustice during his ministry on earth two thousand years ago. In fact, we read that in his wrath the Messiah will slay the nations with the sword as he establishes the eternal kingdom. However, the sword with which he slays the nations is the sword that comes from his mouth. He slays the unjust nations with the sword of truth. This is not the sword that severs people's heads; it is the sword that penetrates the inner soul for it is with the word of truth that the Messiah triumphs over his enemies. And in the concluding drama of history we read that the nations have indeed been transformed by the word of truth for they are bringing their honor and glory into the city of God!<sup>49</sup>

The Biblical scriptures reveal that in the messianic eschaton there will be a universal resurrection of the dead. God raised the Messiah from the dead; likewise God will raise all humanity from the dead in that final day. At that time everyone will face the judgment of God.<sup>50</sup> The scriptures say, "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books."<sup>51</sup> Actually we will never experience full justice in this life. It is at the final judgment that just judgment will finally be rendered.

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<sup>49</sup> Revelation 21:26.

<sup>50</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God, Christian Eschatology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 47-76.

<sup>51</sup> Revelation 20:21.

The Messiah warned that the final judgment is the great divide between those who embrace the way of the kingdom of God and those who reject that way. The Messiah likens to goats those who do not serve the poor, oppressed, hungry, thirsty, sick, naked and imprisoned. These goats will be sent into eternal punishment, the just recompense for their selfish rejection of the way of justice and compassion. The sheep are those who visit the sick, care for the naked, comfort the prisoners, provide food and water for the hungry and thirsty. They will be invited into the eternal kingdom that God has prepared.<sup>52</sup>

President Ahmadi-Nejad in his letter to President Bush rightly comments that the righteous ones will have a role to play in the coming kingdom. The Biblical scriptures reveal the righteous sheep who are invited into the eternal kingdom will reign with the Messiah forever.<sup>53</sup>

The scriptures refer to a new heaven and a new earth.<sup>54</sup> That will be the final consummation of the kingdom of God, the just and peaceful reign of God. In the grand conclusion of history, God proclaims, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away....I am making everything new” (Revelation 21:3-5).

### **Your Kingdom Come!**

Jesus often went into the hills for a night alone in prayer. So his disciples asked him to teach them to pray. The prayer he taught captures the essence of the Messianic reign of peace and justice.

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<sup>52</sup> Matthew 25:31-46.

<sup>53</sup> Revelation 22:5.

<sup>54</sup> Moltmann, 257-320.

Our Father in heaven,

Hallowed be your name,

Your kingdom come,

Your will be done

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our trespasses

As we also have forgiven those who have trespassed against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from the evil one.

For yours is the kingdom,

And the power

And the glory forever! Amen.<sup>55</sup>

### **We Didn't Know this About Jesus**

When I concluded the presentation to the clerics at the Mahdi conference in Tehran, the moderator said, “We did not know this is what Jesus is about. We must investigate the Christian archives to find out the truth of these matters. He seemed not aware that the archives I mostly referred to were the Bible. Then there were comments around the edges of that vast gathering,

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<sup>55</sup> Matthew 6:9-13.



“How surprising that David is both a Christian and a man of peace. One would think that he is a Muslim.”

Several years ago I was engaged in a four-day dialogue with an Iranian Shi'ite in Germany. When I made a similar presentation on the reconciliation of the cross, she responded with anger, “I never knew the cross has anything to do with forgiveness and reconciliation. We Muslims consider the cross an emblem for killing Muslims.”

Immediately images of the Crusaders or more modern wars such as the Bosnian conflict came to my mind. I wept, as I considered such betrayals of the cross and asked her forgiveness for ways that the church has too often betrayed the meaning of the cross as God's reconciling embrace. After a three-hour lunch break it was her turn to speak and she said, “The last three hours have been the most transformational hours of my life, because your tears of repentance for the sins of the church against us Muslims has opened my eyes to a Jesus I never knew about. I do not know where this will take me, but I thank you, for never before have I experienced a Christian asking forgiveness of us Muslims.

### **For Discussion and Discernment**

- 1 To what extent is commitment to reconciliation evident in faiths that do not confess faith in Christ as Savior and Lord? Or is reconciliation a particularly Christian vocation? In what ways does the life and ministry of Jesus form the churches commitment to reconciliation?
2. In what ways is the mission of the Iranian Shi'a formed by their eschatology. In what ways does Christian eschatology form approaches to mission and reconciliation?

3. This essay has focused mostly on the meta-narrative of the Iranian Shi'a in dialogue with the narrative of Jesus. What might the moderator at the Mahdi conference have meant when he said that they were not aware of what they had heard about Jesus? What do you think he heard that surprised him?
  
4. How do you think President Ahmedi-Nijad intends to make the face of Jesus clean? Will that be the face of Jesus, or another face he is cleaning? What do you think he meant when he said that American Christians are making the face of Jesus dirty? How can we make the face of Jesus clean?

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