

# Dialogue Shaping Mission Shaping Dialogue

Author: Evelyne A. Reisacher

Date: 04.03.2010

Category: World Faiths

A response to Chawkat Moucarry's 'A Plea For Dialogue.'

I met Chawkat Moucarry 30 years ago in Paris, when we attended the same church. At that time, his article would have triggered a different response from me. I was strongly opposed to Christian-Muslim dialogue. I had witnessed heated debates in my country, France, between evangelicals and Roman Catholics on the definition of salvation, God, and the role of the church in reaching Muslims. Unfortunately, most evangelicals at that time defined dialogue simply as opposing Roman Catholic views. I believe a lot of misunderstanding in our discussions about dialogue comes from failing to explain what we mean by dialogue, which takes different meanings in different contexts.

I also believed engaging in dialogue with Muslims meant abandoning God's call to mission. Moucarry says at the beginning of his article, 'The two words should never be divorced.' But in my opinion at the time, someone who believed in the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ as portrayed in the Bible was wasting his/her time meeting with Muslim clerics and scholars to discuss theological issues. A recent conversation with a mission leader reveals there are still evangelicals who share that point of view. He said to me: 'Show me how many churches have been planted through dialogue.' Nowadays I respectfully disagree with him. Dialogue may not plant churches, but the lack of dialogue may impede church growth.

Moucarry reminds us that dialogue is not only verbal engagement. It is also a way of life. In this sense, I believe I have been engaged in dialogue since my childhood. There are, most people think, approximately five million Muslims in France. Naturally at school and in my neighbourhood I made many Muslim friends. At the age of 13, after a personal decision to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, I shared this experience in an informal conversation with a Muslim girl of my age. To my surprise she also decided to become his disciple. Most mission organizations would label this 'evangelism,' not dialogue. From that day on, I wrestled with the question of how mission and dialogue should interface: mission or dialogue, mission and dialogue, or mission as dialogue?

After university, I met several Muslim Background Believers in Paris. They were starting a fellowship to meet regularly for prayer, reading the Bible, and inviting Muslims to become followers of Jesus Christ. During 20 years I attended these fellowships and many others that they created throughout France. From these believers, I heard numerous stories of the difficulties and sometimes persecutions they faced in their families and communities as a result of their decision to give more importance to Jesus than Muhammad. I heard even more of these stories when I visited churches in Muslim majority countries. This made me even more reluctant to engage in Christian-Muslim dialogue. It would have looked like an act of treason to my brothers and sisters who were accused of apostasy by some of the same Muslims engaged in dialogue with Christians.

In 2001, I started teaching Islamic Studies and Intercultural Relations at Fuller Theological Seminary, in Pasadena, California. In 2003, Fuller received a federal grant for developing and organizing conflict transformation projects between evangelical Christians and Muslim communities. After an article in the Los Angeles Times reported that Fuller pledged not to offend the faith of Muslims and not to proselytize, concerned and at times angry responses from the evangelical community flooded our campus. It took a long time to explain that Fuller never gave up at any moment its commitment to share the gospel and that there were some inaccurate statements in the Los Angeles Times article. This showed me how controversial the word 'dialogue' was in evangelical circles. But I am glad I participated in this project. It gave me many opportunities to share my faith in Jesus Christ. As we proceeded, the dialogue became an opportunity for evangelicals and Muslim scholars and clerics to discuss their core beliefs, share their grievances and develop healthier relationships. It became a unique opportunity for Muslims to know evangelicals. They admitted when we first met that few had a

deep understanding of evangelicalism. It also gave me the opportunity to better understand them.

When several of my long-term evangelical friends doubted I could faithfully share the gospel in words and actions while engaging in dialogue, even for the sake of peacemaking, I became deeply convinced of the need for a wider discussion between evangelicals on the definition of interfaith dialogue. We need more opportunities for respectful conversation between evangelical proponents and opponents of Christian-Muslim dialogue. Moucarry's article serves as a useful platform for such an endeavour.

Interestingly Cape Town 2010 announces that the program will include reflections on 'the case for the truth and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in a pluralistic world.' As a response to the biblical reflection and consideration of the challenge, we will then recommit ourselves in declaring the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ. I am looking forward to seeing how the relationship between mission and dialogue will be defined as the global church meets in Cape Town. I hope we will hear stories from around the world. At the 2007 Missiology Lectures of Fuller Theological Seminary, which I helped organize, John Azumah, from Ghana, reminded us that 'when we talk about Muslims in Africa we are not talking about immigrants, we are not talking about aliens, we are not talking about strangers, we are talking about fully fledged citizens, we are talking about people who are not just neighbours but relations, family members, cousins, and so it is a completely different dynamic when we are talking about Islam and Christian-Muslim relationships in Africa.' Muslim-Christian dialogue takes different shapes throughout history and throughout the world.

In my life, dialogue and mission are now mutually influencing each other. For example, in 2008 I attended a dialogue on 'Loving God and Neighbour in Word and Deed: Implications for Christians and Muslims' at Yale Divinity School, as part of the 'A Common Word Between Us and You' initiative by 138 Muslim clerics. Among the topics addressed were not only theological presentations on how Muslims and Christians understand the love for God and their neighbour but also how these concepts affect the current status of churches in Muslim contexts. Enjoying coffee during the break with ministers of religious affairs, muftis or imams, provided platforms for sharing, amongst other things, experiences of Christians who live in Muslim majority countries. In my discussions at Yale (or at any other dialogue I attend) I never forget to advocate for the Christian community. Shortly after the Yale conference, I visited Christians in North Africa, who expressed to me their deep concern that while they were not allowed to meet for worship in private homes, they were not granted permits to have their own church buildings. As I bring these concerns to the dialogue table, I am not trying to distort the goal and purpose for engaging in a conversation with Muslims, which involves listening to the religious other, being open to be transformed, articulating one's own beliefs and finding what we can share in order to live peacefully together. But I also take a seat at the dialogue table as a member of the worldwide body of Christ, including those who experience suffering in some Muslim contexts. This is how I understand mission and dialogue 'shaping each other' in Moucarry's article.

In conclusion: Has my perception of dialogue changed? Yes and no. The questions I raised prior to my first experience of dialogue in 2003 are still relevant and must be revisited each time I engage in dialogue. My commitment to Jesus Christ and the gospel has not changed. But dialogue is a constant reminder of the human face of mission: It helps us encounter Muslims as equal interlocutors worthy of being listened to and with whom we should respectfully share our beliefs.

A French citizen, Evelyne A. Reisacher served for over 20 years as the associate director of a church-based organization in France called I?AMI, dedicated to facilitate Christian-Muslim encounters and assist Muslim Background Believers. She is assistant professor of Islamic studies and Intercultural Relations at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Copyright © 2010 Christianity Today/The Lausanne Movement.