

**On Spirituality: Essays from the  
Third Shi`i Muslim Mennonite  
Christian Dialogue**

*M. Darrol Bryant, Susan Kennel Harrison,  
and A. James Reimer, eds.*

*Kitchener, ON: Padora Press, 2010. pages 248 pages.*

This collection of essays, presented at a private Shi`a-Mennonite conference held at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario (27-30 May 2007), are loosely organized around the theme of “spirituality.” The contributors are Mennonite and invited Iranian participants from the most violent center of informal power in Iran (known for its extra-judicial execution of their opponents and the persecution of sexual/religious minorities like homosexuals and Baha`is): the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute (IKERI).<sup>1</sup> I will confine my review mostly to the Iranian participants’ essays because I am not qualified to comment on the Mennonite’s essays, as they pertain to Christian theology.

Almost all of the seven essays by IKERI contributors, all graduates of western universities, seem to be written in wiki-style for readers with a minimum knowledge of Shi`ism/Islam and editors with the most relaxed standards. For example, Mahmoud Namazi Esfahani’s “Spiritual Dimension of Imam Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution” begins by defining spirituality and somehow, “surprisingly” as he puts it, finds the Iranian Revolution of 1979 to be an example of “effective spirituality” (p. 125). He argues that Islam, which is a comprehensive total system, requires the establishment of a political system led by a Shi`a jurisconsult. This is a highly problematic modernist premise, originally championed by Ayatollah Khomeini and entirely against traditional Shi`i discourse, and yet it is

presented as a doctrinal fact with no mention of alternative traditional interpretations.

In his five-page paper “The Role of Islamic Rituals in Cultivating Morality and Spirituality,” Aboulfazl Sajedi concludes that the content, form, and divine source of “Islamic rituals remind us frequently to keep riding on the right path” (p. 187). Mohammad Ali Shomali’s “Spiritual Poverty: A Shi’i Perspective” is more of a sermon on how poverty can mean a lack of wealth, a modest life, a lack of good deeds on the Day of Judgment, or “humbleness” and “nothingness.” Aboulhassan Haghani Kaveh’s “Supplication in the Words of the Infallibles,” another simplistic addition, reproduces a few examples of supplications from the Qur’an and hadith of the Shi’i Imams. Ali Mesbah’s “From Knowing God to Loving God: Spirituality and Submission” is slightly better, for it notes some scholars’ opinions on the difference between religion and spirituality, but it has no concluding point. Mohammad Fanaei Eshkevari’s “Mysticism and Religion: A Shi’a View” fares better. He surveys the standard debate on the differences/similarities between mysticism and religion; however, he provides no critical analysis.

The simplicity of these essays belies their immense negative effect on the lived experiences of Iranians under the current dictatorial regime, something that is evidently entirely missed by the Mennonites involved, despite their claims of suspicion of state politics. This glaring dissonance between theological positions and their negative impact on real life situations is symptomatic of a major flaw in this book. One example is the collection’s most coherent and comprehensive essay: Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen’s “Spirituality in Shi’a Islam: An Overview.” Legenhausen overviews the differences between Shi’i and Christian understandings of spirituality, being a work of the Holy Spirit for the latter and a journey to deeper layers of meaning for the former. With examples from textual sources, sports, films, poetry, and ritual he points to the “spiritual journey” as Shi’i spirituality’s most salient feature.

However, he fails to note how women may relate to this spiritual journey in a misogynist patriarchal system that bars them from travelling without the expressed permission of a male guardian. On the issue of women and gender, it is no coincidence that all of the Iranian contributors are men who quote no female Shi’i scholars (despite the existence of female saints in Islamic history and Iran’s many seminaries for woman; however, they are kept from rising to higher ranks). Whether it be the “Infallible 12 Imams,” premodern scholars, or contemporary ayatollahs, the intrinsically patriarchal nature of Shi’i Islam has systematically omitted women from positions of

power and the production of knowledge, a point that cannot be easily swept under the rug of “spirituality.”

Various theological claims, such as Esfahani’s assertion that the Shi’i jurist’s authority is drawn from the Imams and the Prophet, and ultimately from God’s sovereignty (p. 135), were opportunistically popularized after the 1979 revolution to legitimize the current regimes’ dictatorial structure. These claims seem innocent when decontextualized in a book edited and published by the Mennonites. But in the political context of Iran’s last three decades, it is precisely this claim that have justified the current totalitarian system as “true” and “pure” Islam.

Other examples of dissonance between this project of dialogue, “spirituality,” and lived experiences include A. James Reimer’s erroneous depiction of the protesters objecting to the terms of this private conference as “[those who] objected to Mennonites having friendly conversations with what they considered to be conservative scholars from Iran who are friendly to the present regime” (p. 9) and M. Darrol Bryant, who in his “A View From Outside: Shi’a Muslim-Mennonite Christian Dialogue III,” dismisses the protests of hundreds of Iranian-Canadian activists, journalists, and academics as “attempts to politicize the meetings” (p. 224).

What the Mennonite side seems not to realize, which constitutes a major flaw of this book, is that particularly now in Iran the theological is personal. In fact, to depoliticize these essays via an abstracted spirituality far removed from politics and culture is to legitimize the Iranian regime’s dictatorial grip. This depoliticization effectively erases the acts of resistance undertaken by the disenfranchised local and diasporic Iranians to the regime’s brutality, which is justified and sustained by precisely the kind of “sanitized spirituality” that is the focus of this book. It also allows the Mennonites to shirk accountability and to ignore the human cost of their exclusivist transnational dialogue project. Without the depoliticization and overdetermination of spirituality as a commodity fetish,<sup>2</sup> the glaring differences between the two groups presented in this book cannot remain hidden; nor can they be simplified as “the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and Christ’s sacrificial atonement” as Reimer maintains (p. 9).

The lack of an index, a glossary of technical terms, a bibliography, and frequent editorial mistakes (for example on pages 67, 120, and 161) are the least of this book’s shortcomings. Like the isolative and decontextualized conference that inspired it, and despite its self-congratulatory tone, this book remains very narrow in scope and limited in achievement, if there is any. With the provision of some background, it could possibly serve as a teaching tool

and example of all that can go wrong with an interreligious transnational dialogue that, regardless of the organizers' intentions, results in supporting the normative ideologies of real violence and the denial of difference.

1. IKERI's violent record has been documented and noted in many sources, for example, see Reza Afshari, *Human Rights in Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 213.
2. For a critique of the Mennonites' "dialogue" with IKERI, see Mahdi Tourage, "Fetishizing Dialogue and Commodifying Peacemaking," in *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 26, no. 1 (winter 2009), 136-52.

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