Michael Schluter (transforming international relations)

Charles Strohmer Talks with Michael Schluter, The R Man, about Transforming Intercommunity and International Relations

In a time when human relationships between the West, especially America, and the Arab-Muslim world is fast bottoming out, is there any hope of repairing "enemy relations"? Michael Schluter knows that there's no magic wand, but he also believes that if we more thoughtfully put relationship into foreign relations, we'll have made a significant beginning. And his is not a clichéd meaning to word.

Michael has been working in this area for more than twenty years and his accumulated wisdom couldn't be more timely. After getting his Ph.D. from Cornell, Michael (he's a Brit) worked as a consultant economist for the International Food Policy Research Institute and the World Bank in East Africa. His vision for relationships was formally set in motion when in 1982 he established the Jubilee Centre (Cambridge, England) to explore biblical social teaching that focused on the Old Testament model and on New Testament teaching such as Matthew 22:34-40, with its emphasis is on love of God and loving your neighbor as your self. He is also founding chairman of the Relationships Foundation and is now the research director of Concordis International, which has been active since 1987 as an international initiative of Relationships Foundation.

The Concordis International team has a strong track record in South Africa, Rwanda, Sudan, and Afghanistan, where they have been seeing long-term transformation of relationships across conflict boundaries. Keys for Michael and the team are in finding and building on common interest contexts for engaging all constituencies of a country in systematic and well-researched discussions that move beyond lines of confrontation. Concordis International has worked with US, UK, and EU governments and charitable donors and it maintains political relationships with key other partners. Rather than becoming involved in official peace negotiations, it aims to build relationships that pave the way for peace or for post-conflict nation building.

Michael Schluter, co-author of two books with David Lee, believes that relationships hold the key not only for people in everyday life but for those wrestling with the larger, more complex problems of intercommunity and international relations. I asked him to impart some his wisdom to us. (First published in Openings #18, Apr-Jun, 04. Edited, here, for the Web.)

Charles Strohmer: The Arab-Muslim world carries both real and perceived injustices against Britain dating back a hundred years, and against America from the past few decades. How can such "enemy relations" be repaired?
Michael Schluter: Well both Britain and America have foreign relations committees, and "relations" of course is short for "relationships," so both have "foreign relationships" committees, but which perhaps do not think about international affairs in terms of relationships as much as they could.

CS: Not so relational as relations should be.
MS: That's right. And I think we also forget that, in biblical terms, there are relationships between nations discussed, for instance, in Amos. So biblical precedent exists for thinking that we should be concerned not just for good interpersonal and community relationships but also for good international relations. We should think of what goes on between two nations in terms of relationships.

CS: So you're saying: let's get beyond abstract "nation against nation" thinking. E.g., nations are comprised of people and they have leaders such as foreign minsters, diplomats, and heads of states who have relationships with each other.
MS: That's exactly what I'm saying. And if you look at the features which are preconditions for good personal relationships, you find that they apply equally well to international relationships. There are five of these features that we talk about. Briefly, these are "commonality," which is about shared goals; "parity," which is about mutual respect and the sharing of risks and responsibilities; "multiplexity," which is understanding people from many different points of view; "continuity," which is sustaining a relationship over time; and "directness," which is about communication being face-to-face rather than through a third party.

CS: How would these principles be fruitful in the context of high level political relationships between the West and the Arab world?
MS: I can give you some initial observations. For instance, there is a real problem of parity between the Arab world and the U.S. or

Britain. The most obvious, here, is the issue of courtesy and respect. I think there is a feeling on the Arab side that the West does not really show them respect, doesn't hold them in sufficiently high regard to listen to them carefully, to treat them as equals. Now obviously there are inequalities in terms of economics, military technology, and average living standards. But from a relationships point of view I don't think we should measure a country's "development" simply by its income level. If we believe in a God who is relational, and if God assesses a society by the quality of its relationships, then it isn't true to think that we in the West are the developed countries and these Arab countries are underdeveloped countries.

CS: What do you mean?
MS: From a relational point of view, perhaps they've got a lot to teach us. If you wanted to measure development from a relational point of view, the indicators you might choose would be the divorce rate, the amount of loneliness among the elderly, the amount of abuse of children; those kinds of indicators. On those kind of relational criteria, which I believe are fundamentally Christian criteria, you have to say that the U.S. looks pretty underdeveloped compared to most Arab countries. Now obviously its more complex than that. Arab relationships aren't perfect. It's that we can't look down our long noses and say, Those poor, backward, underdeveloped people. From a relational point of view in God's eyes, perhaps we are less developed than they are. So on parity there is a real issue here. And I think it is fundamentally a question of respect. If we in the West could approach the Arabs with more humility, as if we are really interested in what they are thinking and what is important to them, I think we would find a much stronger basis for cooperation.

CS: You're reminding me of a helpful book I've been reading by rabbi Marc Gopin called Holy War, Holy Peace. He lives in the States but has worked in the Middle East in high level political and religious conflict resolution initiatives. He writes, in part, about the skill of "gestures" as being deeply valuable in relationships with the "other." He tells a moving story about this during one of his visits to Israel in the early 1980s. While walking to the Wailing Wall he had stopped at the Arab suk, which is the marketplace in the Old City, where he became fascinated with a shop that sold statues of Moses, Abraham, and other patriarchs. He writes that at the time he was terrified to be around Arabs. So when the elderly Arab shop owner approached him, hoping to make a sale, he wouldn't speak to the man. But the two of them were looking deeply into each other's eyes. While Gopin was handling a statue of Abraham, the shop owner very quietly asked, "Our father?" Gopin writes that he nodded, and felt strangely "commanded" (his word) to do so, saying quietly in reply, "Our father." The gesture bonded the two of them in a powerful way. Many of us in that moment would underestimate its potential and right away set out to deconstruct it rationally, rather than just accept it for what it was.
MS: I'm sure that's right. The difficulty is that underlying attitudes we have do come out. As Christ said, What is in our hearts does flow out in our words. If we don't have respect in our hearts for these human beings called Arabs then it is going to show in our words and our gestures. It will come out in a thousand small ways which the other person will pick up. And the more powerful you are in the world, the greater the strength of your military hardware, the more difficult it is to have the humility in dealing with other nations, yet the more important it is to show that humility because the other side knows that you have that hardware.

CS: And the more powerful you are, the more powerful symbolic gestures will be.
MS: That's right.

CS: You're reminding me of a discussion here in the States, a crucial one, about the importance of U.S. "soft power" influences in the world, as distinct from "hard power." The latter being about military might and economic clout, the former about values, culture, ideology, and suchlike, which are also exported. Both powers are built into foreign relations. Since 9/11, soft power seems to be getting soft shrift, especially with American upsurge in military intervention.
MS: This brings up a point about another basic feature of relationships, "commonality." There has been among all Western countries a slowness to develop shared goals with the Arab countries, to pursue those together as joint enterprises. Take, for instance, the Millennium Development Goals, which have been agreed upon by the G8 and the UN and by a whole range of international summits. These goals deal with eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, and so on. So here are a whole set of agreed upon goals driving Third World agenda. And it will take hundreds of millions of dollars [to deal with just one of these goals]. Now, whatever you think about the Iraq war, the rights and wrongs of it, the question never asked was: would it be a more effective strategy in the long term to tackle the Arab question by putting the money that we would put by going to war?X billions of dollars?into achieving the Millennium Development Goals. It could have been looked at as a choice. Does the West tackle Saddam Hussein more effectively [by going to war with Iraq or] by forming joint projects with poor Arab

countries, like Yemen, and seeking to achieve these goals? Working with them to accomplish it. This is where commonality comes in, because we have a shared goal. For instance, Yemen wants to achieve those development goals. So we can have a joint goal with a joint target and we're going to measure it together to see if it can be achieved.

CS: You've had some success in Sudan applying these ideas.
MS: That's right, which we've now set up as a separate charity called Concordis. We've been involved there the past five years on a peace initiative, trying to bring together all the major groups in conferences to look at where there are shared goals among the different parties in Sudan. We've been doing this with strong support from the U.S. State Department, who have substantially funded it, as have the British and other Western governments. A number of things have come out of our work in Sudan, such as the cease fire that was implemented in September, 2002. But my point is that in trying to look where there's agreement among the nations, you build relationships among them. Then different nations want to achieve the same thing together. The Americans have demonstrated in Sudan, by their long-term and persistent work with the Sudanese, in trying to move forward towards a peace settlement, just how much can be achieved. I think they have done a very worthwhile job. Of course the whole apple cart is being threatened now by war that's going on in west Sudan, so you need a whole new separate process for that.

CS: Thinking for a minute just about Western cultures, in your first book The R Factor, with David Lee, you suggest that, as extraordinary as Western accomplishments have been, it's come at the expense of our relationships with one another. As someone has said: we've been reduced to being objects of commercial engagement.
MS: I think there's a huge problem in the West. What capitalism requires in order to maximize production, income, and economic growth is that we rely on impersonal markets rather than personal transactions, and we require that money goes to where it can get the highest returns rather than being used in the context of relationships. Also, there's a very high level of mobility, a problem which America, especially, has had. For a long time people have been leaving their extended families and moving around the country, and the extended families got fragmented. So psychologically the ethos developed that mobility was normal and that you should move to where it suited your career best. The result is that we don't tend to know our families very well on a long-term basis because we don't see them enough, and we don't know our neighbors very well because we're all moving so often. Even in the business world, because we're moving every few years, we don't actually develop long-term relationships with anybody.

CS: Would this carry over as an an influence on some US or British international relations?
MS: It flows over into international affairs in the following way. To be skilled at interpreting the signals that another person gives you in the relationship, to have relational skills, grows out of knowing people on a long-term basis. I believe that the high levels of mobility in American society and the lack of long-term relationships, which govern so much of the social order in the U.S., means that when it comes to understanding people from other cultures, and understanding why they're saying what they're saying, and why they are behaving a certain way, Americans don't have a strong foundation from which to do that. Now that's a tough thing to say. But I see the same thing now happening in British society. As we become more and more highly mobile, we're becoming fundamentally less skilled in our diplomacy.

CS: How, then, might we learn to live more relationally?
MS: The answer requires, to use a New Testament term, that we are transformed by the renewal of our minds. It's a re-education process. For instance, whereas the advertising industry and big business is trying to get us to see the world in material terms, we've got to undo that and say: can't we learn to see it in relationship terms? For example, and these may seem trivial examples, but.... When you go out to buy a microwave oven, what are you thinking? Can I afford it? What's it going to cost? Have I got room for it in the kitchen? But are you asking: what's the impact of this piece of equipment going to be on the relationships in this household? Because, of course, without a microwave, it's much harder to come in and grab your food and eat it alone by the television, so the culture of the household is more likely to be: can we get this food at the same time and then sit round the table and talk? Mealtimes are always key times for relationships.

CS: There's a lot of emphasis in international relations about dialogue and also a growing emphasis on responsibilities. Your thoughts?
MS: The good side of dialogue is that it involves careful listening. I've read a brilliant book from Harvard called Difficult Conversations, which is a sort of road map of how to conduct a difficult conversation. Dialogue does offer real potential for moving

problems forward. But it isn't a substitute to building long-term relationships. The emphasis on responsibilities is, I think, a reaction to the whole "rights based culture." There's a great deal of emphasis in Scripture not on what my rights are but what my responsibilities are for you. Am I my brother's keeper? The implied answer is, yes. I have responsibilities to others at a deep level. But "responsibility" is not the whole story because the word that's used most in the Bible to discuss the nature of relationships is love. The more I think about this relationships theme, the more I realize how profound the Bible's emphasis on love is, as being the key to understanding and using relationships rightly. For love involves not just, at an intellectual level, being focused on the needs of the other person, but emotional engagement with them as a person also, sympathetically understanding why they are as they are. Love also encompasses justice and shalom and mercy and faithfulness and sacrifice. One of the greatest weaknesses among us in the West is that we've got this idea in our heads, brought in from postmodernism, that what is most important is that "I am fulfilled in my life," whereas Christianity is saying, for instance, No, if you're in a marriage and you're attracted to another woman, it isn't important to be self-fulfilled. What's important is that you sacrifice your desire to have another woman for the sake of your wife. You actually give up some of your own fulfilment. And as you do that, ironically, by God's grace over time you find fulfilment.

CS: To return to our relationships with the Muslim world, it sounds like you're saying that this can no longer be just the purview of a small groups of specialists who feel "called" to do it. Unfortunately, fear of the other, on both sides, often keeps us stalled. How may we begin to get beyond the paralysis?
MS: Meeting face-to-face is incredibly important. And how one encourages and facilitates that is crucial. I personally felt that Tony Blair was absolutely right to go to visit Gadhafi in Lybia, have a face-to-face meeting with him. There are so few contacts, really, when Western leaders are meeting Arab leaders. And how would you like to be a top Arab leader and be excluded from, say, the G8 meetings? As a top Arab leader, how would you feel about being excluded from top level decisions that are being made about the world economy? So it is important to be encouraging the leaderships of nations to be meeting. But we also need more meetings at every level. Here in Britain, for instance, we have the practice of twinning of cities. But what about twining churches? Suppose the church you went to had a big notice outside it that said: we are twinned with such and such a church in East Jerusalem, or Yemen, or Africa. But a twinning of churches requires, again, that degree of humility to make it work. It can't be us saying, well, here are we, the wealthy Americans, and we've come to give you something. Americans are wonderfully generous people. But there's got to be the willingness also to receive, and what's received may not be in material terms; it may be in relational terms. The gift that an Arab or an African may give is friendship, ongoing love and concern.

CS: And then visit one another in each other's nations? In the long run, that might do more good than a mission's trip. Trips just to learn about one another face-to-face.
MS: Absolutely. And at another level, here at Cambridge University we're encouraging dialogue among the Jewish and Muslim graduate students. It's a relationships building program, too. I think that in America, which is an isolated country geographically, it's important for Americans to build long-term relationships with other nationalities. A good place to start would be in the university cities. There you've got individual students who are living a long way from home, but because we're so nonrelational in the way that we think, we so often underestimate the importance of that one relationship.

CS: The big picture gets better by small beginnings?
MS: In God's eyes, a single relationship is so important. After all, Jesus spoke of the man who left ninety-nine sheep to go to look for the one. To God, even a single conversation is of infinite importance and value.

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(Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft [not the American Attorney General] are editors of the recent book Jubilee Manifesto: A Framework, Agenda & Strategy for Christian Social Reform.)

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