



Muslims and Mission: An Introduction

The Seventh-day Adventist Centre for Islamic studies encourages both experimental pilot programs and academic reflection on the relation of Adventist Christianity to Islam.

by Jack Mahon

“YOU CAN FIND THE HEATHEN NEARER, you can help them at your door.” When I sang those words in my 10-year-old falsetto, it was the '30s, and my family had recently joined the Adventist Church. My sister, now a widow in her 80s, lives close to that rented hall where I once sang. I visited her recently. All around, in the neat red brick houses of Britain's Industrial Revolution, were the homes of thousands of Pakistani immigrants settled in the last decade. They would be shocked to be described as “heathen”; but they are a target of the church's missions outreach, for they are Muslims.

That small Lancashire town is far from unique. Bradford, its Yorkshire neighbor, has an even larger Asian ghetto. Drive through the main street of the city of Leicester in the English midlands, and the shop fronts and bright saris of passersby could persuade you

it was the Indian subcontinent. Open the car windows and the odor of Oriental spices would complete the illusion. Muslim religious leaders in Britain estimate their adherents in such communities as well over two million persons.

The phenomenon of Muslim emigrants to Europe is not exclusive to the British isles. France has opened its door to many thousands of citizens from its former colonies in Africa and the Indian Ocean. Holland likewise has seen an enormous influx of colonial citizens. Germany, bereft of its colonies since the 1920s, still has scores of thousands of Muslim immigrants. On a recent visit to Germany I became aware of the thousands of Turkish automobile workers manning the Mercedes assembly lines at Stuttgart. Promoting management/worker relationships, Mercedes has provided its Turkish-style housing complex with an ornate mosque. In fact, outside the traditional Muslim homelands there are estimated to be between one and two thousand such large communities of Muslims, forming a substantial element of the 950 million Muslims

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who make up more than one-sixth of the world population. Only 16 percent speak Arabic and, of these, a much-diminished number are able to read the Arabic of the Koran.

Of course, Muslims have long been considered by Adventists (and Christendom generally) to be geographically inaccessible and evangelistically unreachable. Now that hundreds of thousands of emissaries of the world's fastest-growing religion are "knocking at the doors" of Europe and North America, how should the Adventist Church react? Is it, in short, a xenophobic nightmare or a heaven-sent opportunity? The Muslim global diaspora has brought a revolutionary change to the evangelization of Muslims, as yet unrecognized by the church at large. Before our very eyes the ancient proverb has been fulfilled, "If the mountain will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain."¹ The prayers of generations of Christian missionaries seem to be succeeding. Jesus did promise that the prayer of faith would move mountains and now the mountain of Islam, albeit piecemeal, has obediently moved to the West. For centuries Christian missionaries, committed to bring Christ to the most gospel-resistant community on earth, could find no foothold in the Islamic heartlands of the Middle East. To proselytize was and still is illegal, for nothing has changed in "Fortress Islam." Converts suffer stringent penalties, are alienated from their families, and may even be killed by a near relative.

In a revolutionary change, millions of Muslims, having emigrated to the West, are breathing the fresh air of religious freedom. First generation immigrants may hold rigidly to the elements of their faith, but their children, defined as "people in transition," are increasingly open to change. In terms of church growth they are "winnable."² They also have the right of re-entry to their country of origin and in future may provide the Christian, or indeed "Adventist" bridgehead that will storm

the fortress or, more likely, infiltrate its defenses. The crucial element in this changed situation is the recognition by the church that Muslim minorities in Western lands must become a priority target for the Advent message. In winning these immigrants for Christ, the church is, in effect, continuing its overseas missions of former decades, but at much less cost and in much more favorable conditions for the nurturing of the new believer and the generating of a new breed of apostles to Islam. At last, the Adventist Church can get to evangelistic grips on its own doorstep with the greatest single obstacle to the "finishing of the work," even utilizing trained and motivated laypersons to bring Muslim sheep into the Christian fold.

In view of the evident favorable dispensations of Providence in thus bringing Muslims by the millions within reach of Christian agencies, what positive steps is the Adventist Church taking? Following recommendations made at the Annual Council at Rio in 1986, the Seventh-day Adventist Centre for Islamic Studies was established on the campus of Newbold College in Britain in 1989, with seven declared objectives. Briefly stated, these included the furnishing of a resource center for organizations and individuals working with Islam, developing evangelistic methods and sensitive procedures for incorporating Muslim converts into the church, and training national workers in these soul-winning approaches.

To administer the centre, Borge Schantz, a Danish national, was appointed. In the course of a lengthy sojourn in Sierra Leone and north Nigeria, Schantz encountered "folk Islam," where the five pillars of the orthodox faith are tintured with elements of African traditional religion. Such dilution makes the subject in general more open to the gospel. Schantz also served as a missionary in the Middle East, directing the sensitive work of evangelism in Muslim states. In later service in Eastern Africa,

including the Horn of that continent, he again experienced a mixture of Islam and the regional religion. When he was called to direct the centre he had completed a missiology doctorate at Fuller and had a few years teaching at Newbold under his belt.

Schantz rates the regular issue of the centre's newsletter, with at least one major article on Islamic evangelism, as his premier communications tool. Schantz has taken the Islamic centre "on location" to practically every union in the world with a sizable Muslim population. At ministerial training colleges and in the field-training conventions he has presented extensive courses on understanding Islam, and principles of Muslim evangelism. In July and August of 1991, Global Mission sponsored an "Islamic Symposium" at Newbold College. Twenty-five learned papers were presented, including a variety of evangelistic models in the context of wide-ranging and mainly practical debate.

Six major Muslim populations were spotlighted, in addition to two 20th-century manifestations of Islam, i.e., "Islam in Europe" and "Black Muslims of North America." Some unconventional but thought-provoking aspects will find a place in the published compendium, i.e., "Dreams and Muslim Mission," and Sufism. Seventh-day Adventist feminist readers are likely to turn first to "Women in Islam."

Several things became clear at the conference. To the Muslim, there is no dichotomy

between sacred and secular; Islam is holistic, involving every aspect of life. With this yardstick, Muslims measure Christianity and Western civilization as one entity and, not surprisingly, find it wanting. The all-things-to-all-men philosophy of the Apostle Paul implies that in order to win Muslims, Christians should themselves, in a particular sense, "embrace Islam." Since Islam means "submission to God," that is not a problem! Primitive Christianity enjoins a similar holistic pattern: "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."

If the Seventh-day Adventist Church is ever to make significant inroads into Muslim populations, it must return to its primitive roots. Muslim converts accustomed to the ministry of the mosque five-times-daily prayers, will require daily support from "seven-day Adventist" workers. Participants left the conference to return to their experimental programs with the thought-provoking notion that in seeking to save the souls of the Muslims at their door, Adventist Christians may serendipitously save their own.

1. This proverb is said to have originated when Mohammed was challenged to provide miraculous proof of his teaching and commanded Mount Safa to come to him, without result.

2. Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 218, 219.