



# Changing Relationships with Our Muslim Neighbors:

The Effects of September 11

Holly Hughson interviews Borge Schantz

*From my student days at Newbold College, I know you were the pioneering director of the Islamic Study Centre. The September attacks continue to dominate much of the news and have forced those of us in the Western world to rethink our attitudes and the influence of our actions. Because you are known as a Seventh-day Adventist specialist on Islam, I would like to hear your perspective on the implications of the September attacks for the Church's eschatology and missions. But, first, tell me, how is a Dane involved in this enterprise?*

**Shantz** In my church employment I have worked thirty-two years outside Denmark. Of these, fourteen were in Islamic areas eight in West Africa and six in the Middle East. I did not know much about missology—the little I did know was instinctive anthropology—and I took the opportunity on prolonged leaves to obtain an M.A. in missions at Andrews University and a Ph.D. in intercultural studies at Fuller Theological Seminary. My dissertation was entitled “The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Missionary Thought: A Contemporary Appraisal.” My academic studies were somewhat focused on African traditional religions. This interested me more than Islamics.

I was lecturing and serving as chair of the religion department at Newbold College when one day I received a call from Neal Wilson, then president at the General Conference. He asked, “Will you start an Islamic Studies Centre?” I was not called because I was an Islamicist, but Wilson knew that I had missionary experience among Muslims in Africa and the Middle East and a Ph.D. in missology. I was interested in the opportunity to serve cross-cultural missionaries. I then began to study Islam, attended some postdoctoral courses, and was for more than six years in charge of that pioneering enterprise.

My approach to Islam took an angle that was less theological than anthropological and oriented toward church growth. This was probably because I had extensive experience living among non-Christians in Africa and the Middle East. In other words, I suggested broad approaches to Islamic people. I had excellent volunteer assistants in the Newbold neighborhood. We published literature on Islam, as well as a magazine called *Adventist-Muslim Review*. During these years, I traveled extensively to Muslim countries conducting seminars and even evangelistic meetings.

*I understand that your successors in the Islamic Study Centre have taken a somewhat different approach, with a daring acceptance of not only Islamic cultures, but also Islamic beliefs as part of their Christianity. Could you explain?*

**Shantz** I can certainly try in a rather general way. The traditional model for Muslim

evangelism is called "Missionary Extractionism," where the convert leaves the Muslim culture and religion and joins an existing Christian church in order to live and worship according to the newfound faith. This method has admittedly yielded limited results.

The *Al Hanif* approach follows something called the "Translational Model." This involves a movement of people to Christ that remains within Islam. The converts maintain part of their Muslim culture, worship form, and self-respect. They have not only the Old and New Testaments, but also the Koran as their bases for belief and lifestyle.

The *Al Hanif*'s name comes from a word used in the Koran for Abraham and those before Muhammad who stayed away from polytheism and paganism. Other mission agencies, mostly charismatic, who were active in the field before Adventists have various other names, such as "Christian Muslims" and "Jesus Mosque," for believers attracted by this same approach.

*What is your reaction to this new approach?*

**Shantz** Now you are leading me into a minefield; I must proceed with caution. I could easily sound like the grumbling has-been, the sulking old man. From what I have seen and heard, most of what I built up in six years in terms of suggested approaches, literature, and professional and academic networks was discarded.

You will understand when I say I felt I had wasted church money and time. I had to watch as the first Global Missions Study Centre was moved away from Europe and the name changed. I must admit that it was discouraging for me to see my efforts and approaches discarded. So what I say could be interpreted as me being somewhat envious. However, I want to be honest in my evaluations.

With this background, let me say that I respect Global Mission for allowing and funding this experiment. It has yielded some results in a certain South Asian setting, where it is operating side-by-side with charismatic Christian groups in a sort of "undercover evangelism." A thorough survey of the quality and quantity of the results is difficult, however, due to the circumstances. However, the experiment has resulted in some followers being left in a kind of "halfway house" between Islam and Christianity.

*A halfway house does not sound like a good place to leave a new believer.*

**Shantz** I agree, and I must confess that, as an Adventist missiologist, I have some problems when I  
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study the approach. Several areas could be mentioned. Let me mention just one: for instance, allowing the use of the Koran as an authority to support Seventh-day Adventist doctrines.

The danger here is that the convert could claim that the same Koran that seems to support Sabbath observance also teaches that Muhammad is a true prophet of Allah. This necessarily creates ambiguity for the Muslim convert, in which the question could easily arise: What in the Koran should be followed and what left out? The Bible is the foundation of the Christian faith and must remain the sole basis for teaching and preaching. Of course, the Koran can be used in a supportive role; however, it should never be used as an authority.

Having been involved in evangelism in different countries, I could easily hear members say: "Why do we expect a convert from Methodism to cut ties with that tradition, which in many ways is very close to Adventism, and at same time not only allow but also encourage a Muslim convert to keep close ties to Islam?"

Naturally, the *Al Hanif* approach is discussed much. It seems to have some justifiable use in situations where there is no religious liberty. As a primary method for Muslim evangelism, however, it seems to be fairly limited.

Recent studies by Fuller Theological Seminary have shown that similar translational methods that have worked in Southern Asia have not worked in other places, for instance, in Africa. The SDA Centre for Adventist Muslim Studies must be prepared to accept the fact that among the 1.2 billion Muslims in the world there are more than one thousand cultures, each of which has people with various degrees of education, standards of living, and religious liberty.

The narrow focus of this one method has left many denominational structures and persons interested in participating in the mission among Muslims without a meaningful avenue of input in programs from the GC-funded center. Ironically, the void created by this focus has led to requests for lectures and seminars that have filled my time. So keen has been the interest in a different approach that the literature left at Newbold at the time of my retirement has been sold out.

*What has changed between Christianity and Islam since the September attacks?*

**Shantz** There is no doubt that September 11 has



changed everything: finance, air traffic security, employment, military strategies—it has all changed. I have rarely experienced an event that has received more attention and been analyzed more by all kinds of people, from psychologists to military strategists. Bin Laden and his people reaped some unexpected and certainly undeserved benefits. One of these was in the area of people's attitudes.

After 9/11 Christians and Muslims in a global situation became more suspicious of each other, and tensions in their relationships hardened. Also, Muslims are confronting each other. On the Danish scene, not far from where we sit in Copenhagen, extremist Islamic groups called a meeting in which they challenged Muslim guest workers, immigrants, and refugees to take a public stand for the war against the "Great Satan," the United States and her allies, Western Europe, including Denmark.

Even Christians in different denominations are

These unfortunate happenings have on a grassroots level generated animosity against Christian countries. As a result, the few Christian missionaries currently in Islamic nations could be in danger as targets for attack and kidnapping, and visas for new missionaries might be difficult to obtain.

*Last October, Ministry magazine published an article from the Centre for Adventist Islamic Relations that failed to mention the political dimension as a factor in its philosophy of missions approach. I find this omission significant in an article written one year after the start of the current Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation, a situation whose reach was made devastatingly clear in the September attacks. Does this omission not betray an ignorance shamelessly endemic to the West, and apparently not lost on the Islamic Centre? Is there any sign that the Church's Global Mission initiative is re-examining the political level that invariably accompanies Christian missions into those Muslim countries*

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confronting each other on the same issue, some with a more lenient, relaxed attitude, others with an attitude that considers Islam a danger to Christianity.

*How have the conditions for mission to the Islamic world changed since September?*

**Shantz** Changes have taken place in some important areas. On the positive side, some Muslims in the West have become fed up with Islam and have turned to Christianity as an alternative. They cannot be counted in great numbers, still it is encouraging that this change has happened at all. A charismatic church in my country recently reported that it has fifty former Shi'ite Muslims now worshiping with it.

In Islamic countries, however, we find some negative reactions against Christians and Christianity. Overall, Muslims do not make a distinction between Christianity and Western politics. The terrorist attacks and suicide bombings have focused the attention of the common Muslim on Western, "Christian" support of Israel versus the Palestinians, as well as on the "Christian" embargo of Iraq, which has supposedly caused the deaths of many children for lack of medicine; and on the presence of American, "Christian" soldiers on holy ground in Saudi Arabia, the soil where Muhammad lived.

*that do not separate religious faith from government, and do not separate Christianity from the Western political agenda?*

**Shantz** The Global Missions Committee that I recently attended discussed the political aspects of the target populations. However, Adventists are generally not known for paying much attention to political issues. Religion and the role of the devil through these systems seem to interest us much more.

No doubt we have mistakenly paid too little attention in mission approaches to the political influence of religion. We have to understand that the Islamic worldview does not separate the sacred and secular, religion and politics. So President George W. Bush can say, "We are not fighting Islam but terrorists who happen to be Muslims." However, a Muslim will say that when you kill Muslims you are fighting Islam.

*True. If so, then perhaps Global Mission resources are better directed at the cause of religious liberty than individuals?*

**Shantz** Yes, the issue of religious liberty with a right of individuals to change religions is a most important issue in evangelism to Muslims. In *Shari'ah* law, execution with the sword is the punishment for apostasy from Islam, but it is fortunately not always practiced.

For this reason, the General Conference Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty is already heavily and actively involved in campaigns to secure this basic human right in Muslim states. However, it is an uphill battle, perhaps even hopeless. A change on this issue means that Muslims have to reverse a "law" issued by Allah.

*The issue of the death penalty for apostasy is a very frightening aspect of Islam. Is this religious movement mentioned in the Bible? Does Islam figure in the Church's eschatology?*

**Shantz** The traditional interpretation of the fifth and sixth trumpets in Revelation chapter 9 refers to Islam and the Ottoman Empire. However, the timeline for the prophecies in Revelation 9 did not go beyond 1840, according to Adventist traditional interpretations. About that time, it was becoming clear in Europe and the United States that the Ottoman Islamic empire was losing its influence; Turkey was being called the "sick man of Europe."

This concept is key; the Church presumed Islam would fade with the Ottoman Empire. We have, therefore, really only made brief references to Islam in our eschatology.

*What do you see as the significance of the September attacks for the Church?*

**Shantz** Just as it has changed so much in the world, September 11 should also force the Adventist Church back to the prophetic drawing board when it claims to be a prophetic movement. The Church needs to ask: Do we need to investigate further whether Islam as a movement is mentioned in the Scriptures? Could Islam be an anti-Christian power?

We find ourselves caught off guard, not just as Western Christians, but also as members of a Church that specializes in prophetic interpretations. We have not really taken time seriously to update our prophetic interpretation since Uriah Smith. Each generation of Christians standing on the shoulders of the pioneers experiences the Word of God for itself. This includes revisiting prophecy.

There are several points to consider in connection with Islam. For instance, 1 John 2:22 identifies antichrist with two points. The first sign of an antichrist is that it denies Jesus is the Christ. The second is that it denies the Father and the Son.

These statements could be said to point directly to Islam. Muslims accept Jesus as a prophet, but never as

the savior. Allah has ninety-nine names, according to Islam, but never is he called "father." And when we use "son" for Christ, Muslims call it blasphemous. On the folk level, some Muslims even suggest that if Allah is the father, then there must be a mother, and is that Mary?

It is interesting that almost all the signs traditionally used to identify the papal powers as "antichrist" also fit Islam.

*Are you suggesting that the Church revisit the issue of whether or not Islam is an antichrist? If so, does that mean the whole concept of antichrist is fluid and potentially changing? What is the threat of the Papacy today? Is it perhaps diminished or changed from the perspective of one hundred and fifty years ago and now replaced by the sleeping giant of Islam?*

**Shantz** These questions really cannot be answered in a few sentences. However, I shall try to give my opinion in a few brief remarks, and no doubt thereby expose myself to refutation, disapproval, and criticism. But since 9/11, I have been exposed to various Christian attempts to find meaning in what is going on. Here is my conclusion as of today.

In his epistles, John allows room for more than one anti-Christian power. We believe that the term John uses in these epistles means one who is opposed to or takes the place of Christ. Perhaps our focus on the papal powers being the great antichrist has taken us off guard in respect to other anti-Christian powers. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Papacy does not seem to constitute a real physical danger to true Christianity.

Islam has hidden deep within its theology phrases that could be potential threats. This should cause all Christians—Roman Catholics included—to be on guard. Some people will claim that such attacks are a result of Muslims misinterpreting the Koran and the traditions, but I am not so sure. Today, Muslim people are aware of themselves. They generally blame the Western nations for their backwardness and past humiliations. Now they will in their writings find arguments to justify their actions.

*If the Church were to go so far as to name Islam as an anti-Christian system, wouldn't that only increase the potential for harm and encourage Christian fundamentalists?*

**Shantz** That is a good question. First, we are talking about identifying an anti-Christian system, not its people. Remember that the SDA Church has not



named Islam as an anti-Christian religion; I have my personal ideas on that issue.

My point is this: Look at the results we have gained from prophetic interpretations that have pointed directly at other anti-Christian systems. Well, pressed into a corner, we have to admit that our soul-winning progress and spiritual renewal come from areas where a power we have identified as being the Great Antichrist has had sway for centuries.

For example, look at the growing and powerful SDA church work in South America and the Philippines. These regions have for centuries been dominated by the Catholic Church. We have been prepared, also here, perhaps sometimes in private sessions, to call the papacy the "great antichrist." And we have had great success in these regions. I ask you, what do we lose in calling Islam an anti-Christian religion?

Perhaps our danger comes from living in an age where a spade is not called a spade. In our dealings with any anti-Christian power we are trying to identify a system that could be anti-Christian, but not

you always come to a point of confrontation if you want a person to change his mind or attitude. The wise person will not seek confrontation until he has established some points of agreement. But in my experience, in all soul winning sooner or later you come to a point where you must tell the other person what is wrong about his or her beliefs and offer a better way.

*Given the increased volatility of this time, what should guide our approach to Islam?*

**Shantz** There are 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, a population equal to that of China. All of these people are God's concern and embraced by his love. Most Muslims live in fifty countries, where there is very little or no religious liberty, no meaningful contact with the gospel, and no missionary contact. In addition, Muslims face the death penalty for leaving Islam.

We have to accept the fact that there are groups we cannot reach. The Gospels talk about shaking the dust off your feet. Wherever we have no right to approach Muslims we should do all we can to strengthen the

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condemning people. You could even say that we identify antichrist in order to warn the people to leave a false system. Confrontation is unavoidable.

*You say that sooner or later we will have confrontation. I must confess this is something I have great difficulty accepting. There is simply nothing in my experience that would lead me to take up arms or even words against another person in defense of my religious beliefs.*

*Of course, this is a comment on a life of relative comfort and freedom in the West. But I suspect this feeling is quite common among Western Christians and that Western churches have not even begun to appreciate it. Let's face it, the potential for confrontation creates a huge gap between the tithe-paying member in the United States or Europe, and what the missionary is preaching and asking new believers to accept in the field. Is this unavoidable?*

**Shantz** Perhaps the word "confrontation" is a strong one. Perhaps there could be a softer way to express the concept. What I am trying to say is that in religion, politics, and business—in all dealings between people—

few—often oppressed—Christian churches. As far as the unreachable Muslims are concerned, we have to leave them in God's hands. The Scriptures reveal that in the final judgment all facts will be taken into consideration. God is not only just, he is also love.

*Thank you for this compelling discussion.*

**Shantz** It has forced me to think through and express my experience and observations in more concise—but perhaps not always precise—terms.

Thank you for challenging me.

Borge Schantz is writing a book about Muslims among Christians. During his forty-seven-year career for the SDA Church he served as a pastor, evangelist, field president, division departmental director, teacher, head of a theology department (at Newbold), and founding director of the SDA Centre for Islamic Studies. He served as a missionary in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Lebanon, and Cyprus. He received his Ph.D. from the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary.

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