

Discussed: eschatology, focus on family life, mission, Waldenses, world religion, Qur'an, PARL, triumphalistic evangelistic efforts, reform efforts, spiritual growth, Jesus' ministry

New Directions in Adventist-Muslim Relations

Spectrum Interviews Jerold Whitehouse

Adventists officially began to address relations with the Muslim community in 1990 with the creation of the office of Global Mission within the General Conference. However, in the post-9/11 world, they changed their approach. What was formerly the Islamic Study Center has become the Global Center for Adventist-Muslim Relations (GCAMR), and Jerold Whitehouse has become its director. The center is located in Loma Linda, California.

Central to Whitehouse's approach is basic respect for Islam and an understanding that God has been and is active in the spiritual lives of honest Muslims. His purpose is to challenge Muslims to a deeper faith, one that considers important an assurance of salvation from an understanding of God's plan for saving faith as revealed in the Bible. Yet he maintains that Muslims do not need to abandon totally their spiritual and cultural heritage, but rather use it as a foundation upon which to build deeper faith.

Spectrum recently caught up with Whitehouse and asked him a series of questions about Muslims, the program he directs, and his approach.

SPECTRUM *What is the purpose of the Islamic Study Center that you oversee for the General Conference? Is helping Adventists understand Islam as significant as taking Adventism to Muslim countries?*

WHITEHOUSE In 1995, the Global Center for Islamic Studies was renamed the Global Center for Adventist Muslim Relations to indicate a new focus on building understanding relations with Muslims. Foundational work in raising awareness of Islam had been

done previous to that, and it was felt that it was time to shift the focus to building relationships and equipping Adventists to engage more effectively in a respectful manner on spiritual matters with Muslims.

Over the past eleven years, we have tried to fulfill that mandate from the General Conference Office of Adventist Mission (formerly the Office of Global Mission).

If one looks at the history of Adventist Muslim relations, we have suffered from a lack of clarity in how we should relate with

Islam. Our traditional evangelistic methods have not communicated well with Muslims, in some cases have been offensive to the Muslim, and have sometimes precipitated violent responses. This has resulted, in many cases, from our inaccurate understanding of Islam itself, or from outright offensive statements about Islam.

Although we are concerned about communicating the biblical message clearly as we understand it, we must always do so with respect and with an "other competency" that guides us into a nonoffensive and respectful encounter. Doing anything less is to compromise the very representation of the gospel that we are trying to communicate.

So our purpose can be thought of as twofold: First, and probably most important initially, it is to equip Adventists with the knowledge, attitude, and practical tools to interact with the Muslim "with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:16 GNT). Secondly, it is to assist Adventists actually to engage with Muslims in a spiritual journey as together we seek to know God's will for our lives in these end times of earth's history.

SPECTRUM *What do Adventists and Muslims share in common?*

WHITEHOUSE There are a number of areas of commonality between Adventists and Muslims that should be our first focus. The tendency has been to focus on the differences and therefore try to point out error in the other. This has only led to deterioration of relationships and sometimes increase in hostilities. It is only as we recognize that the Muslim's spiritual life is as God-centered and complex as ours that we can begin to interact in a substantive manner.

We have strong areas of commonality in our belief in one God, for example. We are in the line of the three monotheistic faiths coming out of Abraham. Allah is the Creator God, the God of Abraham and the rest of the prophets through whom he has sent messages. Yes, there are differences in emphasis and understanding of certain characteristics of God, or how God is known. But our differences in this area do not change God himself as the Supreme Being worshiped by Adventists and Muslims. It is an area for discussion and growth in understanding, to be sure, but it must be recognized also as an initial area of commonality.

Another area of strong commonality between Adventists and Muslims is our eschatology. It's in our name and therefore provides a strong link to

Muslims, who also believe in the "end of time," the return of Jesus (Isa al Masih), and the day of judgment. Again, there are differences in the details of understanding of these beliefs. But the basic understanding of a day of accountability, of the end of this demonstration of sin at the coming of Jesus, the institution of a new home for God's faithful, and the resultant commitment to living godly lives in preparation for these events, are strong commonalities that we can utilize in building a relationship of trust in spiritual matters with the Muslim.

As a leading Muslim writer noted to me personally after several hours of discussion on areas of commonality and areas of difference: "Yes, we have our differences. But we must remember that at the end of all things we both will stand before the same God. Shouldn't we work together to assist each other to prepare for that day?"

Other areas of commonality would be our conservative lifestyle, focus on family life, and our health principles. Abstinence from pork and alcohol are elements that assure the Muslim that we are serious about our faith and our relation with God.

SPECTRUM *Some Adventists consider your approach to Islam and mission controversial. Why is that? What do you do that raises questions within Adventism?*

WHITEHOUSE From my perspective, the concerns raised are largely from two issues: one is a lack of accurate information and understanding of Islam or from a focus on only the negative aspects of Islam. We often fall into the trap of comparing the worst in the other with the best in our own tradition.

One of the prerequisites of respectful interaction with the other is a healthy self-criticism. We must be willing to admit that in our own faith tradition there have been individuals, even leaders, who have not represented the best ethics of our tradition appropriately. It doesn't help for us to simply point the finger and say, "They have a greater problem in this area than we do." Our first responsibility is with ourselves.

Another area of concern could stem from my perspective on our mission as Seventh-day Adventists. It is my understanding that God ordained first the "Advent Movement" and subsequently the Seventh-day Adventist

organization as a prophetic movement in the end of time with a unique mission that is bigger than itself.

It is a prophetic role within all peoples. It is a role and mission that takes precedence over institution building or sectarian agendas. It is to carry a warning message to prepare a people from among all peoples for the coming of Jesus. It is based on the understanding that God is using the Advent movement to prepare a larger remnant that we are certainly a part of, but we are not the whole. The final remnant is larger than Seventh-day Adventists alone.

This understanding forms the basis for my rela-

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tions with Muslims. I can move into the Muslim context with a biblical, spiritual message, establish trusting relationships, and move on a path of mutual spiritual growth. But if it is cloaked with an institutional or sectarian agenda, it will be rejected as undermining faith and destroying traditional values of Islam.

Because our regular Adventist evangelistic approaches are not able to function in some countries where religious freedom is not practiced, we have classified certain countries or people groups as "closed." I personally don't think God classifies any country or people group as "closed." This is a human creation from within our institutional mindset. If one looks at mission history in the Christian era, the major mission movements did not have the privilege of religious freedom. They did not classify any country or people group as "closed."

The Waldenses did not wait for religious freedom in Europe before disguising themselves as traders and seeding the Scriptures into Europe. The biblical message should be able to move into any people group and take root within that context in order to prepare a people for the coming of Jesus. Such a spiritual movement finds a resonant note within sincere, honest hearts in the Muslim community.

I am pleased that the Church is wrestling with these issues at top levels. As can be expected, there are cautions and concerns. But there is a growing sense that we must find ways to relate effectively on spiritual matters with the Muslim and that this will require new ways of thinking and working.

SPECTRUM *You mentioned in an earlier conversation that three Muslims who accepted some form of Adventism were killed after their story was told. Have any Adventists working in the 10/40 window lost their lives for proselytizing?*

WHITEHOUSE I prefer not to respond to this question.

SPECTRUM *If participating in any kind of organized religious activity other than Islam is so deadly in some places, why did the General Conference vote guidelines for organizing companies of believers in such areas?*

WHITEHOUSE The General Conference did not vote guidelines for "organizing companies of believers" in such areas. What happens within the Muslim community must be the decision of adherents there. We cannot dictate how they should organize or proceed in spiritual matters. As I indicated above, the church leadership is wrestling with the issues of our relationship with such groups as Islam. There is a growing realization of some of the issues that I raise in the third question above. I feel that a recapturing of the "spiritual movement motif" is a key to this entire question.

SPECTRUM *Jon Dybdahl has described Adventism as a world religion for Ministry magazine. How do you define Adventism? Is it a Christian religion? What is the importance of a definition for a religion in Muslim countries?*

WHITEHOUSE I have no quarrel with Dybdahl's description. I would use different descriptives but I see no basic difference in our philosophies. I think I have essentially answered this question under the previous questions. However, let me expand a bit.

Islam by definition is the religion of "submission," or as some more current scholars prefer, "commitment" to God. Muslims therefore see it as the universal religion. The biblical prophets (the Qur'an lists about twenty-four prophets that are also in the Bible) were Muslim, since they were totally submitted to God. Islam has over the centuries become an organized religion that represents a political and religious force. Christianity has suffered from the same progression—from being a Christian—one who follows Jesus—to

Christendom or an organized religion with political and religious triumphalistic agendas.

My assertion would be that we must avoid all association with these "institutional" agendas that carry the tone of triumphalism. We must recapture the "spiritual movement motif" as we endeavor to fulfill God's purpose for us in these end times. Jesus asserted very clearly: "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). What part of that phrase do we not understand? Ours is a spiritual mission, but when clothed in a "Christian" package it is interpreted by the Muslim as an organized religious/political entity with triumphalistic objectives. This truncates who we are and our mission.

SPECTRUM *What efforts are being made by Adventists to address religious freedom within Islamic countries?*

WHITEHOUSE The Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty is active within Muslim circles in promoting religious freedom. Obviously, this is a large and ongoing task and I applaud what PARL is doing in this regard. I am not directly involved in its initiatives since I have a different focus.

It is interesting to note that more and more Islamic leaders are speaking out on behalf of tolerance and religious freedom. This is a welcome development. Rashid Omar, a professor at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, where he coordinates a program that focuses on religious conflict and peace building, in a recent dialogue between Christians, Jews, and Muslims at Andrews University, noted that Islam is in need of reform to apply the ethical principles of the Qur'an in the current world.

He further gave a word of caution: that the efforts of himself and colleagues with similar concerns in Islam are made more difficult by the "triumphalistic evangelistic efforts of Christian organizations." Personally, I take his concern seriously. We can encourage and strengthen the reform efforts of these key leaders in Islam while not compromising our end-time spiritual mission.

SPECTRUM *Does the contextualization that you recommend for Adventism in Muslim countries work when similar changes are made to the worship and sacred study of Scripture in a Buddhist or Hindu culture?*

WHITEHOUSE I cannot answer this question fully since I have not studied those traditions in depth. I do feel

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that similar respectful research needs to be done with other faith traditions. I am convinced that there are values and principles of truth in every faith tradition upon which we can build in linking with them in spiritual growth. The issues we face are different in each faith tradition, so I cannot say what form it would take in another tradition. But a respectful, careful approach, seeking to plant the biblical message within that context will be rewarded.

SPECTRUM *Once I asked a Christian who grew up in a Muslim home to tell me his conversion story. He said that he could not do that because his mother had taught him never to be critical of other people. Does becoming an Adventist require being critical of other religions?*

WHITEHOUSE There is no place for criticism of another faith tradition. That does not mean we don't look critically at that system (as we should our own) and define clearly where the biblical message must provide guidance to new understandings and behaviors. But

one should never be required to abandon totally his or her past heritage.

The biblical message does judge one's past and that must either be abandoned or seen in a new biblical light. But it is more productive to focus on those spiritual elements from one's past that one can build upon. Our mission is one of witnessing to the biblical message about God, not of being destructively critical of other faith traditions.

SPECTRUM *How has your study of Islam affected your concept of Adventism?*

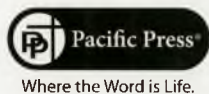
WHITEHOUSE My description of Adventism and its end-time mission has been clarified because of my interaction with Islam as well as my study of God's incarnational activity in history and the model ministry of Jesus.

Jerald Whitehouse directs the Global Center for Adventist Muslim Relations in the General Conference Office of Adventist Mission.

"I have always believed in God. What changed in my heart during the translation of Rainbow Over Hell was that I realized God believes in us. As He believed in Saburo Arakaki and saw a man of God and not a murderer, so He believes in us."

—**Sharon Fujimoto-Johnson**,
former assistant editor and designer of *Spectrum*.

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