

My Friend and Brother, Mohsen | BY WILLIAM G. JOHNSON

The following is adapted from a presentation given at the 2013 Adventist Forum Conference at the Sheraton Read House Hotel in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on September 7, 2013. The conference's theme was interfaith dialogue.

For the past 40 years I have been trying to figure out America. My wife and I came to America to study. We left but soon returned to work here. We fell in love with the land—this land of breathtaking natural beauty, of purple-mountain majesties and amber waves of grain.

Even more than the land, we fell in love with what America stands for:

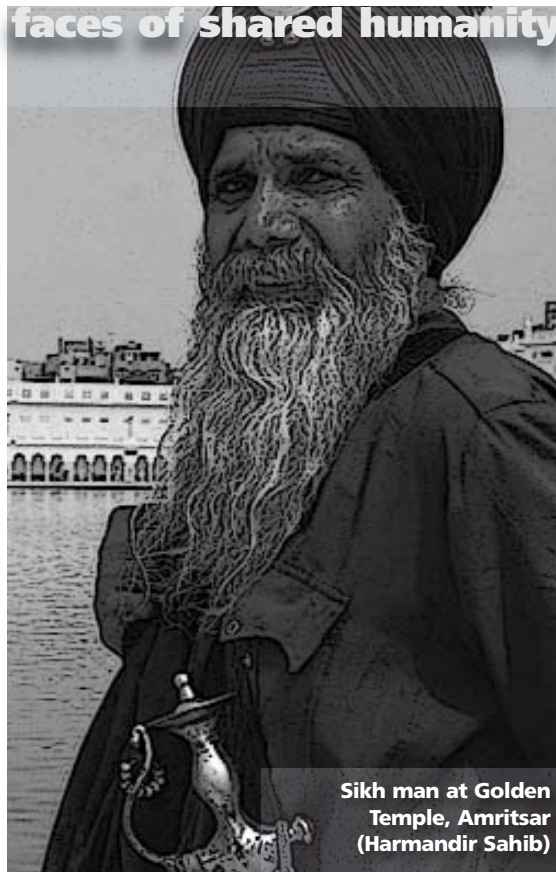
- Its freedom to think new thoughts,
- Its freedom to express them,
- Its freedom to pursue hopes and dreams,
- Its freedom to live and grow and be.

So my wife and I decided to be naturalized. We didn't rush it—we had lived here twenty years before we eventually took out the papers. In a deliberate, considered act, we became Americans.

I have to tell you, however, that I'm still trying to figure out America. Some aspects of the culture confound me—the obsession with guns? I don't get it; I don't think I'll ever get it.

And then there is a dark side that every now and then bubbles up into full view from the depths of the culture.

Just as nature here turns terrifying with hurricanes, tornadoes and wildfires, so every now and then the ugly America, never far out of sight,



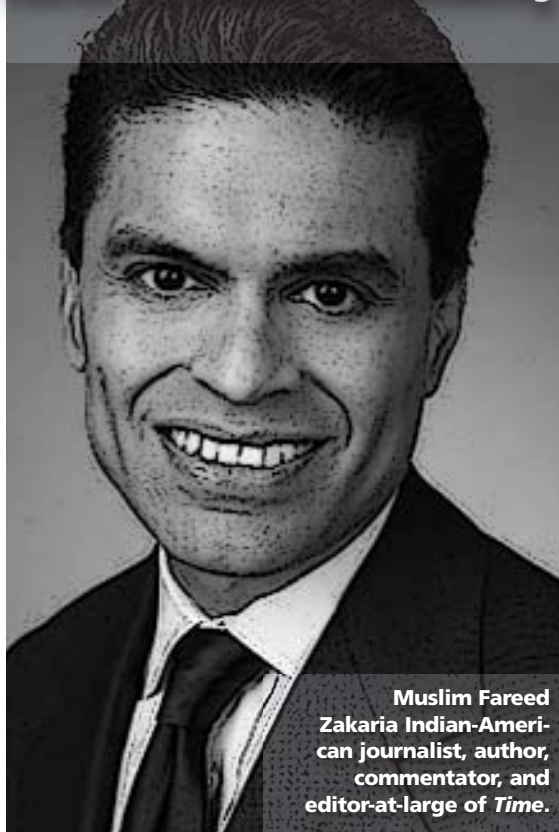
[I dream] that each of us would...make the effort to befriend someone of another religion... to get to know them at the deep level of our shared humanity.

erupts. This is the dark side of men in white hoods, with their burning crosses and lynchings; the dark side that ridiculed and beat and bullied and killed Jews and Roman Catholics and Mormons—and Seventh-day Adventists.

There was, there is, a deep racism here. This country, so blessed, is also cursed. Slavery cursed the white race as surely as it cursed the black. Its pernicious roots continue to spread like a malignancy, distorting relationships, eating away at the freedom to be truly human.

Now, along with racial prejudice, religious

The curse of racism and the curse of the current religious bigotry is that it destroys



Muslim Fareed Zakaria Indian-American journalist, author, commentator, and editor-at-large of Time.

our common humanity, the humanity implanted by the one God.

hatred again stalks throughout the land. The attacks of 9/11 have thrown us off-kilter. The land of the free and the home of the brave has become poisoned with religious ignorance, bigotry, and hatred.

Although following 9/11 President George W. Bush, in one of his finest moments, urged Americans to avoid branding all Muslims as terrorists, this is exactly what happened. We're twelve years along from the events of that fateful day, and it seems to me that the mood has become more intolerant, more hateful, more crazy.

Just over one year ago on August 5, 2012 at 10:30 a.m., members of the Sikh community in a Milwaukee gurdwara were preparing for worship. A 40-year-old white man drove up and began shooting with a semiautomatic weapon. He shot and killed six people and wounded four others; then he took his own life.

What ignorance! The Sikhs are not Muslims—theirs is a completely different religion.

They also look different: Sikh men do not cut their hair or shave their faces. Their turbans set them apart from the crowd.

And that's all it takes to turn them into a target for hatred and violence.

I am troubled—deeply troubled. America has changed since 9/11. We have lost much—in freedoms, in kindness, in love, in the largeness of spirit that made this a great country.

This time of worship isn't your usual sermon. As poorly as it may come across, think of it as the cry of an anguished heart, a cry for the land that won my heart.

With that I also want it to be a call, a plea to join me in helping to roll back the dark. As citizens of America, we must call her back to the freedoms that made her great. And as followers of Jesus of Nazareth, the Prince of Peace, we must take up the challenge of his call: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons [children] of God" (Matt. 5:9, NIV).

Interfaith Relations with Apostle Paul

In the book of Acts we find the apostle Paul, that intrepid church planter, in an interfaith setting. Facing stiff opposition in Berea, Greece, the brothers have whisked him away to Athens. It was all done in a hurry: Paul had been targeted by the enemies of the gospel. His fellow workers, Silas and Titus, apparently were not in danger; they stayed behind in Berea to wrap up the work Paul had started.

So here is Paul in Athens. He's all alone, waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him. Athens is a fascinating city. Once the heart of the Greek empire, its political power has waned, but it is the intellectual and cultural capital of the world. It's a place where ideas are batted around; it's the cutting edge, like today's New York or London.

Here East and West come together; here philosophers and wandering gurus hold forth; here ancient religions collide with new expressions of faith. What will Paul say in this situation?

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean."(Acts 17:16–23)

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To an Unknown God. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you."

"The city was full of idols." Travelers from the period inform us that Athens was cluttered with religious objects: shrines, temples, images, altars. It had become a joke; it was said that in Athens it was easier to find an altar than it was to find a person.

Paul walked the city and what he saw distressed him.

But the polytheism and idolatry weren't all—there was a synagogue there where Jews and Greeks attracted to the Hebrew religion used to meet for worship. As Paul did in other cities, he went to the synagogue and spoke to the worshipers about Jesus.

And there was a third group in this interfaith mix. In the marketplace Paul encountered them—Epicureans and Stoics. These people followed schools of thought that had originated in Athens some three hundred years earlier.

The Epicureans held that pleasure was the ultimate good. They weren't altogether hedo-

nists, but they were like a lot of modern people—you only go around once, so eat, drink, and be merry. A common epitaph on their gravestones read: "I was not. I was. I am not. I don't care."

The Stoics disputed with the Epicureans. Their founder was Zeno, who liked to teach in the Painted Porch of Athens among its *stoa*, or columns (hence the name "Stoic"). This philosophy, which exerted great influence for several centuries and attracted some famous Roman emperors and writers, was thoroughly pantheistic. Nature is God: God has no individual being apart from nature. It taught that we conquer the world by conquering ourselves. Self-control and fortitude—these were the qualities that enabled one to "live according to Nature." All people are manifestations of the one universal spirit, so we should live in brotherly love. Thus Diogenes of Sinope used to say: "I am not an Athenian or a Corinthian, but a citizen of the world."

Like Epicureanism, this philosophy taught that there wouldn't be any individual existence after one died.

Paul meets people in the street and begins to tell them about Jesus. Well, they had never heard of him! And the idea that he came back from the dead—preposterous! That idea had been mooted several centuries earlier and had been laughed out of court.

This Paul: he's a charlatan. They call him a "*spermologos*," someone who dabbles in ideas like a sparrow that picks up seeds here and there.

But it will make for some fun. So they take Paul to the Areopagus, the highest council of the city, and invite him to share his ideas, crazy as they seem to be.

What will Paul say in this interfaith setting? First, he does *not* take them to task for their idolatry. Instead of castigating them—"Gentlemen, I never saw such a junked up city in all my travels! I thought you guys were supposed to be intelligent"—he says: "This is a very religious city. I even saw an altar inscribed 'To An Unknown God.' You are so careful to cover all

**As citizens of
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faces of shared humanity



The Apostle Paul preaching in Greece

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“The Unknown

God.”

your bases that you erected this monument to whatever deity there may be beyond the gods we know of in Greek and Roman religion. Yes, you are religious indeed!”

And Paul goes on: “This is the god I want to tell you about. Not Zeus or Apollo or Aphrodite or even Athena—you already know about them—but the Unknown God that you think might just be out there.”

Here Paul gives us three important points for interfaith dialogue today:

1. Treat the other religion with respect,
2. Look for common ground, for points of contact,
3. Take a positive approach; avoid negatives.

Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, provides a synopsis of Paul’s speech. It runs through verse 31 of chapter 17. In it, we see three movements or moments—one God, one humanity, and one Man for the ages. And not once does Paul quote a text from the Old Testament.

Instead, he quotes from two poets whose work

would be familiar to the audience—from the Stoic Epimenedes and from Arastus.

Only one God, says Paul, not a pantheon of gods and goddesses on top of Mount Olympus, making love and making war.

Only one God, who made the world and everything in it.

Only one God, too big to be confined to a temple.

Only one God who doesn’t need human beings to bring him food or drink.

Only one God, who gives life and breath to every creature.

Only one God—*this* is the Unknown God!

And today I say it with Paul: Only one God. Not many gods; not Yahweh and Jesus *and* Allah and Vishnu *and* Buddha.

One God—above every human conception of God.

One God—greater than all, the source of all that is—the life of all that is.

We who are Christians understand this one God through Jesus Christ, who said: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). But God is too big to be contained within the limits of our puny minds; because God is God and we are human, God must forever to some extent remain “The Unknown God.” We “grope” for God, says Paul, using a word that denotes the stumbling of a blind person feeling his way (Acts 17:27).

God made man in his image. Ever since we have been busy making God in our image. Not the one God, but our little gods. Yes, even Christians. Yes, even Seventh-day Adventists.

So out of the current craziness we hear:

“God doesn’t hear the prayer of a Jew.”

“God doesn’t hear the prayer of a Muslim.”

“God doesn’t hear the prayer of a Hindu.”

What presumption! What distortions of the one God, what idols, what gods do we make when we give voice to such statements!

One of the worst claims made by Chris-

tians, including Adventists, is that Allah is the name of a pagan deity, not the one God. This is ignorance: long before Muhammad was born, the Christians of Arabia spoke of Yahweh as Allah, and they still do today.

Paul goes on to say that as there is one God, there is one humanity.

One Humanity

The one God made one humanity. We all come from the same stock, whether Americans or Arabs, Indians or Russians, whether red, yellow, black or white.

We are joined at the hip. We are joined at the heart.

And Paul quotes the Greek poets in support: **Epimenedes:** "For in him we live and move and have our being." At the core of our being, beyond the accidents of skin color or place of birth or social status, we share the same common stock. God is the Father of every person, and we live by him and in him.

Aratus: "We are his (that is, the one God's) offspring." We are family. We're related. We're brothers and sisters.

The curse of racism and the curse of the current religious bigotry is that it destroys our common humanity, the humanity implanted by the one God. Instead of brothers and sisters, we become mere animals, closeted and caged, separated, divided by suspicion, riddled with lies, consumed by prejudice.

At Cornell University, near the entrance to the main hall of the College of Arts and Sciences you find a telling statement: "Above all nations is humanity."

This world made by the one God is achingly wonderful. May the Lord forgive us for not loving it enough. And the best part of this wonderful world are the people. The people! Their endless parade, their quirks, their beauty, their funny ways. And their struggles to cope, to survive. Their heartache, their pain, their disappointments. May the Lord forgive us for not loving his children enough.

Most mornings I go out walking in a park near our home. It's a beautiful, quiet place. Often you see deer, occasionally a bluebird. Because I go out at the same time each day, I have become acquainted with other people who walk at that hour. One man I always look for—"Mr. Good." No, that isn't his name, but that is how I think of him. I can recognize his gait from a distance. As soon as he sights me, he puts up both hands and breaks into a huge smile. When we meet, we follow a ritual: we slap hands and he says, "Good! Good! Good!"

What's it all about? It's about the joy of a new day, exhilaration of walking in the fresh air. And our shared humanity. Because as Robert Browning put it: "Life is just our chance o' the prize of learning love."

One God, one humanity. But Paul isn't done yet. He closes where he always closes, no matter where he begins. He closes with Jesus.

One Man for the Ages

The book of Acts reads: "For he [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by that man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

Jesus is the meaning of the Creation.

Jesus is the message of history.

God made humanity for himself. He put within each of us a divine spark, a God-hunger so that, says Paul, we would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him: "God did this so that men would seek him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27).

Man is incurably religious. Whenever and wherever humanity exists, you'll find forms of religion. Some of these forms are crude and infantile; some of them are noble with high moral content.

Man is *homo religious*.

As he is *homo sapiens*, man the thinker, and *homo faber*, man the maker, he is also *homo religio-*

God made man

in his image.

Ever since we

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The one God made one humanity. We all come from the same stock, whether Americans or Arabs, Indians or Russians, whether red, yellow, black or white.



sus, man seeking God.

All our ignorance in religion—all our idols, all our little gods in our image, all our distorted worship and conceptions—come into judgment. The Man of the Ages, the Man appointed by the one God, will call the world to account.

This was Paul's final word to the interfaith audience of the Areopagus.

That word brought a mixed response. Some of the hearers openly scoffed at the idea of resurrection. Others, more polite, said, "Let's talk more on this subject."

But there were some who went away impressed by what they'd heard that day, impressed enough to become followers of Paul. One was member of the Council of the Areopagus; he was named Dionysius. Another was a woman named Damaris. And there were others, but apparently not sufficient to form a congregation of believers. There is no record of an ancient Christian church in Athens.

I find this account of Paul's experience in Athens especially instructive in light of our

times. Now some people will tell you that Paul blew it, that his address to the Areopagus was a failure because not many of his hearers accepted Jesus, that Paul learned from this failure and determined, when he moved on to Corinth, to preach only "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

I'm not convinced. Instead, I incline towards F.F. Bruce's assessment that Paul's different approaches in Athens and Corinth merely demonstrate his ability to adapt his presentations to different types of audiences. And if Paul erred in his approach in Athens, I find it extraordinary that Luke would devote so much space to it in his account.

No—not a failed attempt. Instead, I see Paul's Areopagus address as a model for us today as we encounter men and women of other faiths or of no faith.

My Friend, Mohsen

Now let me tell you about my dear friend and brother, Mohsen. He died last year; I miss him terribly. We had grown very close. He had taken to signing his email messages to me: "Your friend and brother, Mohsen."

I should probably start the story with a confession: my wife Noelene and I went to India as young missionaries straight out of college. For fifteen years we lived in that amazing country—that fountainhead that gave birth to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism; that opened its doors to the Parsis, Zoroastrians who fled for refuge; and that today has a Muslim population of nearly two-hundred million. But I cannot think of one non-Christian person with whom we formed a close friendship. I confess this fact with a sense of deep regret.

We came to India to give, not to receive; to convert, and not to make friends.

After India I taught at the Theological Seminary at Andrews University and then enjoyed a long—really long—stint at the *Adventist Review* and *Adventist World*. When at last I hung it up at the end of 2006, I planned to go back to the classroom. But my boss Jan Paulsen had a different idea.

"I want you to stay on and work as my personal assistant," he said. "Our church is everywhere in the world—Adventists have neighbors who are Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists—but we are scarcely known. I want you to contact leaders of these other faiths at the highest level possible. Tell them who we are and what values we hold. If they accept our message, that will be fine; but it's not your primary purpose."

So that is where my life has gone ever since. I have been involved in interfaith relations. I have learned a great deal, traveled a lot, and changed—for the better, I hope. I have been enormously enriched. And I have experienced something altogether unanticipated: controversy, with some of the ugliest mail I ever received (and as editor I thought I'd seen it all).

Most of my work has been among Muslims in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. An Adventist pastor—who writes a weekly column in Arabic for a newspaper and who is consequently well known—opened doors for me. I was amazed at the range of civic and religious leaders I was able to meet: the chief judge of the secular and sharia courts; Princess Basma, sister of the late King Hussein; the chief imam of Jordan; the former ambassador to the United Nations, and others.

Everywhere I was received graciously. These leaders knew nothing about Seventh-day Adventists, yet each showed great interest in our lifestyle and values.

With several Jordanian leaders I had ongoing contacts, and we became friends. Because of their good offices Adventists were able to sponsor two conferences on teaching respect for all religions. The second symposium, held in a university setting, was opened by the state minister of religion.

These contacts in Jordan shattered the stereotypes about Muslims. Without exception the leaders whom I met were people of finest quality who condemned acts of violence, whether or not perpetrated by terrorists calling themselves Muslims.

I soon realized that Adventists and Muslims

have much in common and wrote an article for the *Adventist World* making this point. Titled "Adventists and Muslims: Five Convictions," it was published February, 2010 and developed five ideas:

1. The Lord is preparing the Muslim world for his second coming.
2. Seventh-day Adventists are uniquely positioned to interact with Muslims.
3. Prophecy can be a valuable approach to arouse the interest of Muslims.
4. We Adventists need to undergo major changes in attitudes and in spiritual lives before the Lord can use us to appeal to Muslims.
5. Interaction with Islam has the potential to renew and reform the Adventist Church.

The article brought more mail than anything I ever wrote. It went viral among Adventists, and responses kept coming for two years. Some of them took me to task: I was naive, I had been deceived, I had played into the hands of Muslims, whom one cannot trust. You cannot trust Muslims, the argument went, because the Koran teaches them *taqiyya*—permission to lie and deceive.

But the biggest surprise was still to come.

The General Conference received an intriguing request: a Muslim leader in Sydney, Australia, a sheikh, had met some Adventists and wanted to meet leaders of the church. Would the GC send someone to talk with him?

Dr. Paulsen appointed three of us to follow up: Angel Rodriguez, Ganoune Diop, and me. I went on ahead of the others to assess the situation and frame an agenda for the first meeting.

I shall not forget that first encounter. I expected to meet someone with a long beard and turban. Dr. Mohsen Labban, clean shaven and hatless, was dressed in a business suit. At his invitation the meeting took place in the large living room of his home in a Sydney suburb. Eventually, I would come to know that room very well: here the Sheikh spoke each week to between twenty and thirty followers seated around its perimeter.

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Portrait sculpture of famous Buddhist monk wearing silk kesa

One of the
 Sheikh's
 followers once
 spoke to me at
 length about
 how he lives by
 the Sermon on
 the Mount.

This first day we were just two people—Dr. Labban and I. After welcoming me, he asked pointblank: “Do you believe that Jesus will come soon?”

“I do.”

“Yes, but how soon?”

“Soon. We Adventists don't set a time for the Second Coming.”

“I believe Jesus is coming very soon.”

We talked for hours, talked easily and cordially. I learned that Dr. Labban, a spiritual leader for a division of the Sufis, was an Egyptian trained in economics. He served the United Nations in Geneva as chief financial officer for sixteen years, then as advisor to the government of Australia.

And he revealed why he was so interested to meet with Adventists. He told me that “he”—I was not sure whether he meant Allah or a messenger of Allah—had showed him that Seventh-day Adventists had a message that Muslims should receive.

That was the first of many meetings over

the course of the next three years. We shared and discussed and bonded. I made a series of trips to Australia. I spoke at his mosque. I sat with the large group in that living room—educators, medical personnel, attorneys, financiers, students—listening as the sheikh dispensed wisdom until the wee hours of the night. Often he would ask me to comment on an item or to lead in prayer.

He liked Noelene. Once in an email Noelene, knowing of his struggle with lung cancer, shared her thoughts on prayer. He was deeply impressed and thereafter referred to her as “Sheikh Noelene.”

The Sheikh lived with a sense of the immediacy of the supernatural. He frequently pointed up and said that “he” told him this or that. One time I asked him about the revelations he received about Adventists. He pointed up—“he,” he said—and held up three fingers:

“Three times,” he said. “The same message.”

During one conversation as he and I sat in the big living room I asked when he had first met an Adventist. He named a fellow academic from long past. “It's been thirty-eight years since I heard from him,” he said.

Just then the telephone rang—it was the same person on the line!

I could share much, much more about my friend and brother Mohsen, but one additional item will have to suffice. From someone I picked up a piece of information that I could hardly believe, so I decided to enquire if it could be true. One day, instead of sending his son to pick me up at my hotel, he arrived for me in person, seated behind the wheel of the car with the roof down. The moment was right to ask: “Dr. Labban, I heard that you used to compete on the Bendigo car racing circuit. Is that true?”

He smiled. Without a word he put his foot to the pedal and we took off at high speed through the streets of Sydney. He reached down and took out a CD. “Do you like this?” he enquired as he put on the Tijuana Brass at high volume. So we raced through Sydney, music

blaring, and holding on with white knuckles.

What a man! My friend and brother,
Mohsen!

For a couple years we entertained high hopes of something groundbreaking—a book on the Second Coming, jointly published by Adventists and Muslims. Dr. Labban wanted it printed in English, Arabic and French and circulated by the millions throughout the Muslim world.

We came close to seeing it happen. But alas, at the critical point our church leaders—who initially had been enthusiastic—got cold feet. The Sheikh was bitterly disappointed, and so was I.

But he didn't give up on Adventists. He solicited my help in planning for a public event on the Second Coming. To be called "The Descent of Issa," it was scheduled for June 2012. I promised to come back for it.

He did not live to see it. He succumbed to cancer in May of that year. His followers, led by his son Akram, decided to go ahead as planned. I flew to Sydney for the event and spoke.

On the Saturday evening following the event, family members and close followers gathered around a long table laden with food at the Labban home. I had sat at the table in the past, always on the Sheikh's right. This time, over my protests, they placed me at the head of the table in the Sheikh's chair.

Our Shared Humanity

One question remains, and I expect you have been wondering about it: Jesus—what about my friend and Jesus?

Dr. Labban and his followers spoke of Jesus in glowing terms: Jesus was sinless; he was born of a virgin; he is the way by whom we come to God. He will come back to the earth because only he can solve the mess that this world is in. One of the Sheikh's followers once spoke to me at length about how he lives by the Sermon on the Mount: "There's not a day goes by that I don't think about

Jesus," he told me.

The doctrine of the Trinity as it comes down through the ancient creeds was a problem to Dr. Labban, as it is to other Muslims. I told him that he might understand it better if we put the creedal language aside and went back to the scriptures. He wanted to talk more about it with me, but he passed away before the opportunity arose.

He was a good man, a godly man. I leave him in the keeping of my Lord, who does all things well. And I leave all Muslims, all Hindus, all Buddhists, all Sikhs in those same hands. Jesus, the savior of the world, is also judge of the world.

This man, my friend and brother Mohsen—just by getting to know him—shattered stereotypes of prejudice, ignorance, hatred and bigotry, exposing them as lies.

As I close, could I leave with you two dreams I have? First, that each of us would determine to make the effort to befriend someone of another religion. Not just a casual acquaintance, but to get to know them at the deep level of our shared humanity.

Second, that we each do what we can to make our schools, our hospitals, our churches a welcome place, a safe place, for people of other faiths.

Join me in working to roll back the darkness. ■

William Johnsson, PhD, represents the General Confer-



ence and North American Division in Interchurch Relations. Previously, as special assistant to the GC President, he served in Interfaith activities.

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