

To Concerned Seventh-day Adventists and Editors of Adventist Magazines

Attached you will find some objections to the February 2010 article in *Adventist World* entitled “Adventists and Muslims: Five Convictions” [<http://www.adventistworld.org/issue.php?issue=2010-1002&page=11>]

People have expressed their concerns to me and having read the article carefully I fully agree with their apprehensions.

If the article just had appeared in a local Adventist magazine I would probably never have read it and perhaps not have reacted to it.

However, *Adventist World* is distributed globally and translated into several languages with a world-wide readership. It is also perceived as an organ that is loyal to the official stand of the church on issues.

I feel strongly that we owe our members to get an honest and true picture of a religion that has created a troublesome situation in many parts of the world.

Our relationships with world-religions and other Christian traditions should be expressed with Christian courtesy, however, also with an honest transparency, so all parties know exactly where they stand on issues.

I pray and trust that the Concerns will be accepted in the same spirit they were written namely as an attempt to remind us of our extensive responsibilities.

Sincerely,

Borge Schantz

Adventists and Muslims: Five Convictions

A concern expressed.

by BORGE SCHANTZ

The February 2010 issue of *Adventist World* published an article titled “Adventists and Muslims: Five Convictions”. At the time of publication, I was travelling abroad and was not aware of the article. Back in Denmark, the article was brought to my attention by several

concerned people who were troubled by various points in the three-page article.

When I read the article, I certainly also had my questions, not only about the arguments put forth concerning the Adventist-Muslim

relationship, but also concerning the implication that it was published as the official expression of what Seventh-day Adventists stand for in relation to Islam. This implication was suggested by the fact that the author introduced himself as “assistant to the General Conference president for interfaith relations.”

To this concern must be added my worry that the content of the article is deceiving credulous Seventh-day Adventists in general as to the nature of Islam, which many people of the world do not experience as peaceful.

Relatedly, for many of the approximately 300,000 Adventists living in Muslim areas, it is a dismissal of their steadfastness in the face of persecution, and a show of contempt for what they and their forefathers have endured as second-class citizens by confessing Christ and being Adventists. Furthermore, how will they feel when they see that treasured Adventist doctrines they have stood up for, now suddenly are listed as somewhat similar to Islamic beliefs?

In addition, one wonders how will this appear to their Christian non-Adventist neighbors with whom they have for years lived courageously as an oppressed Christian minority among a majority of Muslims?

Then of course I am also quite sensitive to the attempts to please a religion that in the Christian West—in spite of many peace-loving adherents—is creating problems on local, national, and international levels. Members are hardly insensitive to what is happening in their own countries: threats of terror, hours wasted in airports due to intrusive and backwardly-reactive inspections, legitimate fears as to where the next shoe will drop, demands for special treatment that fly in the face of Western values, etc. To their many honest questions about Islam, and particularly how it may relate to Bible prophecies, the published article will be of no help. I submit it will be misleading.

Only a few cardinal points will be dealt with. It is my attempt to draw attention to what I see as some of the problematic arguments in the article.

1. The Second Coming of Jesus: This doctrine, which is the core of Adventism, is taken to introduce the whole article and serves as the initial attempt to show how some of our most

important doctrines can be used to open conversation with Muslims and establish trust.

But I ask, do we in truth have that doctrine in common, as the article suggests?

The second coming of Jesus is not mentioned in the Koran. There are, however, scattered references that reveal an Islamic eschatology. It will suffice for now to point out that the teachings within Islam about return of Jesus (Hadrath Isa's Descension) must be gathered from different *Hadiths*, which, are the words and deeds of Mohammed collected two hundred years after his death.

There are varied interpretations of the *Hadith* texts. However, in sum, the common thread running throughout the various collections is that Jesus will descend to Damascus, where he will serve the Mahdi (eschatological redeemer of [Islam](#)). The Dajjal (Islam's antichrist), together with 70,000 Jews, will be killed by a breath from Hadrat Isa (Jesus). Jesus will also kill the swine and break the crosses. As a result of these wonders, people will accept Islam.

It is further believed that Jesus will stay on earth for 40 years and will marry and have children. Then Jesus will die and be buried in Medina.

Do we as Seventh-day Adventists find a commonality with Muslims on the belief about the Second Coming of Jesus? Is that truly a legitimate building block upon which to establish relations? Or is it more an attempt to blur the distinctions between these two world religions in order to appease and appeal? How long is it suggested we pretend to have this doctrine in common before we come clean with the real truth about the critical differences? For these differences are so critical, and to suggest otherwise is to be unfaithful to our church and to our Saviour.

2. The list *What We Have in Common* in a similar way plays on the words but does not take into account what these words mean in the mind of a Muslim. Nine points are listed. Again we see that comparisons are frequently far-fetched, forced, and not backed by the evidence.

Lifestyle and Health. Perhaps it is true, as the article suggests, that one could largely eat what is served at a Muslim table. (It should have been pointed out, though, that this could include camels, hares, and oysters.) I think it important

to keep in mind, however, that “lifestyle” also consists of human relations. Polygamy, the role of women, and Muslim rules for dress and family life are among the very visible points where, even with our best intentions, we cannot agree.

The *last days* and *cosmic conflict*: Islamic eschatology is only touched on in the Koran but developed in interpretations of the various *Hadiths*. They are imaginative and fascinating to study, as we have seen in the Muslim concept of Jesus’ return. However, the events described all have the same undertone: latter-day calamities have the purpose of justifying Islam and annihilating all non Muslims, including Christians and Jews.

It is true that we share a belief in a God-effected *Creation*, in common with most world religions. I would, however, question the idea that the *Sabbath* is shown in a positive light in the Koran.

It is perhaps an easy exercise to find politically correct words and catch-phrases for all Islamic beliefs so they sound like Christian fundamentals. However, as a general rule, we must keep in mind that all of the fundamental Christian beliefs are based solely and immutably on the ministry and death of Christ to save us by faith. This understanding is utterly absent in Islamic beliefs. Islam is a law-based religion. Salvation comes solely through following the law.

Once one sees this enormous difference, one realizes one cannot compare these two religions without looking closer at what each is really saying. In other words, at the finer points of the two sets of doctrines. It won’t do to deny that, once one gets down to the specifics, Adventists and Muslims really have very little in common.

3. There is the question of whether to use the term Adventist and not Christian. Of all the issues raised, this especially is disturbing.

In my many years of living in Islamic nations and working among Muslims, I have never tried to say that I was anything but a Christian. If there were further discussions and questions, I could explain my Adventist connections and convictions by stating that I am an Adventist Christian. But I have always stayed within the framework of the larger circle of Christianity. I cannot imagine doing otherwise

It is true that the name “Christian” is tied in with a lot of baggage. But Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Southern Baptists, and others also carry “baggage” with their names in some countries. There are, however, no suggestions or attempts to change their names. And there should not be. We have to live with negative elements of our history, just as peaceful Muslims have to live with the negative associations arising from the terrorist attacks taking place today in the name of Islam.

In this connection it is noteworthy that, for instance, when a Sunni-Muslim in Iran is persecuted by Shiite-Muslims (which happens frequently), he will not flee to the bastion of his fellow Sunni-Muslims in neighboring countries. The persecuted Muslim will instead seek refuge by fleeing all the way to Christians countries. They know that where to find acceptance and hospitality. It is among Christians practicing the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Just as Christians understand that there are Muslims and then there are *Muslims*, Muslims likewise are able to grasp the fact that there are Christians and then there are *Christians*.

4. The points about prejudice are well taken. But generally Muslims are not exposed to more prejudice than other groups of immigrants having another language or colour of skin. And Christians who live among Muslims are also stigmatized. Warnings about prejudice against Muslims, while useful, need to be balanced with clear-eyed recognition of certain disturbing facts and very real threats coming at present from the direction of the Islamic world, including Muslim minorities in our midst.

5. The high birthrate of Muslims in Western countries is a fact that all such governments have to deal with. And Muslim Da’wah leaders quote these statistics with pride. The DVD circulated could be an exaggeration. But the real facts, ascertainable from the best sources, are worrisome enough. To downplay the potential for major clashes in the future in Europe and elsewhere is to do a disservice to those readers seeking greater understanding.

6. When it comes to evangelism to Muslims it can, perhaps surprisingly, be reported that more manpower and money (also in SDA churches) are used today than ever before in the history of missions. More people express concern. More are ready to go. It is, however, in most cases a

question of getting into Muslim areas that are guarded by Shari'ah law and reaching Muslims in our midst who are exposed to persecution if not execution when they change their religion.

7. The figures given for peaceful Muslims comport with my own understanding. Law enforcement agencies that keep tabs on extremists estimate that the number of rabid fundamentalists is about 6% of a given Muslim population. However, the 6% who are Islamic fundamentalists can, by applying Shari'ah law, control the 94% who are not.

8. Muslims are brought to Christ through friendship and concern, that is true. We are to love the Muslim. Christ died for every one of them, just as He died for us. However, we should distinguish between genuine love for the Muslim as a person and a naïve conception of Muslim beliefs as being similar to our own. Islam has no room for a Saviour. The Koran warns against the Bible teachings. And once again, the message of Christ as our Saviour is the main issue.

Attempts by various authors have been made in official church publications to “gently” answer the questions thousands of Adventists are asking today in regard to the true and factual role Islam plays in the world. Some have tried to enlighten members regarding the mention (or lack thereof) of Islam in SDA biblical eschatology. Some of these have been helpful.

However, it appears to me that editors are not infrequently exercising a misplaced self-

ensorship at the expense of freedom of expression, forgetting that we owe our existence as a church in many parts of the world to this international human right.

In sum, we seem prepared to publish overly-positive interpretations of a religion that has, in a disturbing number of cases, openly revealed what are, to say the least, unsettling if not hostile purposes.

One further thing should be noted. The article was based in part on dialogue with a Muslim sheikh and his associates. As we are aware, religion deals with dogmatic absolutes which vary from one belief system to another. Because of this, there will always be the potential for conflict and confrontation. Should attempts be made to harmonize for the sake of peace, taking from each of the religions only those very few elements upon which everyone can agree? The answer must be “no.” Dialogue will not be sincere if it requires the partners to give up absolutes which characterize their religion. We cannot deny the fact that at the center of our faith there is Jesus Christ, the unique mediator between God and human beings. (1 Timothy 2:5).

The dialogues with the sheikh and other Muslims authorities are praiseworthy. Any meaningful dialogue with Muslims is greatly to be encouraged. Positive communication will help to decrease tensions and can be an opening for a witness to Jesus Christ as Saviour. But let us not attempt to disown who we are and whom we serve.