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# How Should the Church Contextualize for Muslims?

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# HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH CONTEXTUALIZE FOR MUSLIMS?

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## When Muslims accept Christianity, how much of Islam should the church expect them to leave behind?

**A**n Adventist missionary baptizes a Muslim who continues to repeat several times a day that “Mohammed is the prophet of God” and prays for blessings on the “prophet” and his family. A newly baptized convert attends the mosque on a regular basis, where the divinity of Christ is consistently denied. Another convert still participates in the “feast of the sacrifice.” How far can we go with contextualization among Muslims? This is a matter of intense debate within some sending organizations due to the fact that many believe that some approaches have led to syncretism.

*Contextualization* refers to the process of making the biblical text and its context meaningful and applicable to the thought patterns and situations of a given people. It covers the cultural adjustments that have to be made in cross-cultural evangelism. *Syncretism* is the fusion of two beliefs.

Frequently, syncretism is born of a desire to make the gospel relevant. To avoid syncretism, Seventh-day Adventists are admonished to “agree

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with the people on every point . . . [where they] can consistently do so.”<sup>1</sup> The key concept in the previous sentence is consistency. Syncretism is allowing the culture to change the biblical message and compromising biblical doctrines, “the replacement or the dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements.”<sup>2</sup>

Syncretism of Christianity occurs when the basic content of the gospel is changed by the cultural values of the context. Syncretism is the conscious or unconscious reshaping of Christian beliefs and practices through cultural accommodation so that they blend with those of the dominant culture in ways that are not consistent with the Scriptures.

According to David Hesselgrave, syncretism occurs in two equal and opposite forms: under-contextualization and over-contextualization.<sup>3</sup> In both cases the worldview of Scripture is ignored in favor of a culture. A healthful contextualization takes place at the very center of the continuum between these extremes, with room for a variety of choices moving on either side. What makes things difficult is that there is no sharp boundary between good and bad contextualization, except faithfulness to Scripture. Even though one missionary’s contextualization is another’s syncretism, the fact is that there are acceptable and unacceptable approaches.

Doctrines are supracultural, and any attempt to contextualize must preserve their integrity. An acceptable contextualization will not change doctrines. Doctrines are divine truths that should not be confused with theology.

At its bare minimum, theology is what humans think about what God said. Theological formulation never happens in a religio-cultural vacuum, but a theology that begins with culture will unavoidably lead to syncretism. An acceptable theology does not begin with the context but with the text. An acceptable theology will always be characterized by faithfulness to the Scriptures.

In the “Contextualization Spectrum,” the “C-Scale” measures the level of contextualization from 1 through 6 among “Christ-centered communities” found in the Muslim context:

C-1: Traditional church using outside language.

C-2: Traditional church using inside language.

C-3: Churches using inside language and religiously neutral inside cultural forms.

C-4: Contextualized Christ-centered communities using inside language and biblically permissible cultural and Islamic forms.

C-5: Muslim communities that affirm they are followers of Isa the Messiah. They still live legally and religiously within the community of Islam.

C-6: Secret/underground believers who are believed to be Muslims by the Muslim community and say themselves that they are Muslims.

The question is, At what point in this scale is the integrity of the gospel compromised? “Faith Development in Context” (FDIC) ministries is a new name for Adventist efforts using C-5 strategies.

This categorization is incomplete in the sense that it does not describe well the mindset of both outsiders and insiders. It will be helpful to identify and differentiate between three approaches to the Contextualization Spectrum. They could be described as the “perspective of an insider,” the “perspective of an outsider,” and the “strategic perspective.”

### C-5 Muslims—An Insider’s Perspective

It is possible to consider the C-Scale from the perspective of an insider. Some believers are in a stage at which they are still doctrinally, socially, and legally within Islam (C-5). Others, however, have decided to remain culturally within the boundaries of Islam but are aware of the implications of their decision to follow Christ (C-4).

People arrive at a point of conversion through different paths. From an evangelical perspective, *conversion* is understood as a change of heart that takes place when a person accepts Jesus as Savior. The understanding of

what conversion is all about differs greatly among Adventists. Some tend to equate it with a rational acceptance of a set of doctrines, after which a person is ready for baptism or for a change of denominational preference. Others think of it as a sudden, immediate, complete, radical, absolute, final change of life. Yet others may see it as a process.

Conversion of a non-Christian to Christianity may require a change of assumptions in several areas. We may argue about doctrines, but we cannot argue about assumptions. How can a Hindu become persuaded that there is only one God without using the Bible? The natures of God, of man, and of sin as shown in the Qur’an are different from the Christian understanding based on the Bible.

To change the assumptions of a worldview, a non-Christian may require more time than a non-Adventist Christian does to accept the Sabbath. A Muslim who is in a slow process of conversion needs time to understand the gospel and its requirements. A missionary must begin where the non-Christian is. “Christ drew the hearts of His hearers to Him by the manifestation of His love, and then, little by little, as they were able to bear it, He unfolded to them the great truths of the kingdom. We also must learn to adapt our labors to the condition of the people—to meet men where they are.”<sup>24</sup>

Instead of beginning with Bible

***Instead of beginning with Bible studies, a Muslim may need to receive “Qur’anic studies.” This person and his or her community may take a slow path toward Christianity. In time he or she will study the Bible. The transition from full acceptance of the Qur’an to full acceptance of the Bible may take years. The process of change might be multi-generational, meaning that it will begin with individual conversions, possibly with persecution and martyrdom.***

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studies, a Muslim may need to receive “Qur’anic studies.” This person and his or her community may take a slow path toward Christianity. In time he or she will study the Bible. The transition from full acceptance of the Qur’an to full acceptance of the Bible may take years. The process of change might be multigenerational, meaning that it will begin with individual conversions, possibly with persecution and martyrdom. Ideally, the process will reach a stage at which a generation may find it easier to move closer to the ideal when an entire community and even people groups may experience conversion.

Once people are ready for a responsible decision, they should be baptized. They may begin as Adventist Muslims (C-5); however, in order to receive baptism, they must at least be Muslim Adventists (C-4). The C-Scale is used here not to describe the strategy followed by a

missionary, but to describe the Muslim’s understanding of the gospel. The following version of the C-Scale, considered from the perspective of an insider, illustrates the fact that Muslims may be in different stages of maturity:

C-1: Converts who have been uprooted from their culture.

C-2: Converts who are able to transcend cultural differences and can worship using foreign worship patterns.

C-3: Converts who feel at home in worship since they use linguistically and religiously neutral, native cultural forms.

C-4: Baptized believers in Isa who make a conscious effort to witness to the Islamic community by using biblically permissible cultural and Islamic forms in worship. In some areas, they may need to worship in closed communities, while in others they may even establish “Adventist

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mosques.” Just as the early church flourished in a spiritually hostile climate, C-4 communities may also emerge in an Islamic context.

C-5: Non-baptized believers who still refer to themselves as Muslims who are followers of Isa the Messiah. The believers remain “legally, culturally, and religiously within the Muslim Ummah.”<sup>5</sup> They may attend the Muslim mosque on a regular basis, while at the same time worshipping with fellow believers on Sabbath.

C-6: Secret/underground believers who are believed to be Muslim by the Muslim community and who themselves say that they are Muslim.

An important difference is that C-4 believers are aware of the fact that they have become Christians and have joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church. C-5 believers still refer to themselves as Muslims. They are in a different stage in the process of conversion, with different levels of understanding of the gospel. C-5

believers are still legally within the community of Islam, meaning that they would repeat many times a day and at the mosque that “Muhammad rusul Allah” (“Mohammed is the messenger of God”).

C-5 communities are considered a Muslim offshoot by the Muslim community, and they do not see themselves as being part of the church, the body of Christ. “The work being facilitated by the Study Centers [sponsored by FDIC] is resulting in new believer groups which are not able, for various reasons, to integrate into the existing local church. This has resulted in the establishment of new structures in order to provide nurture and allow for new growth among the new believers.”<sup>6</sup>

C-5 believers still maintain many beliefs and practices that are contrary to the gospel or, perhaps, have not yet understood the requirements of the gospel. This kind of believer needs further instruction and correction

(Acts 18:24-26). Even though during a few decades of early Christian history, believers worshiped in the Jerusalem temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1) and attended Jewish synagogues until they withdrew either voluntarily (19:8-10) or under duress (Acts 13:45, 50; 18:5-7, 14-17), the New Testament also records the rebaptism of an entire community of believers that was baptized without knowing the essential aspects of the Christian doctrine (Acts 19:1-7).

Scripture refers to the church as a body (Eph. 1:22; 4:15, 16; Col. 1:18). C-5 believers, however, “are by definition not linked to the local church.”<sup>7</sup> As a result, and against the advice of the Global Mission Issues Committee, most baptized C-5 believers are not aware “of the fact that they belong to a particular worldwide ecclesiastical community—the Seventh-day Adventist Church.”<sup>8</sup> This is unethical and against the explicit instructions of Ellen G. White<sup>9</sup> and of the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*.<sup>10</sup> A baptized person should not be disconnected from the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4, 5).

### C-5 Missionaries—An Outsider’s Perspective

Another adaptation of the C-Scale can be used to describe different levels of willingness to adapt in the missionary’s mindset. This section describes the C-Scale from the perspective of the outsider, i.e., the missionary.

C-1: Missionaries make no attempt at contextualization at all.

C-2: Missionaries offer a Western church service using inside language.

C-3: Missionaries show appreciation for the local culture by incorporating into worship as many neutral inside cultural forms as possible, such as music, artwork, and ethnic dress.

C-4: Missionaries create contextualized Christ-centered communities that not only use local language and incorporate neutral cultural forms in worship, but also biblically permissible Islamic forms, such as praying with arms raised, touching the forehead on the ground while praying, and separating men from women.

C-5: Missionaries believe that a Muslim can be saved without leaving Islam. Some baptize Muslims who are not even aware that they are joining the body of Christ. Some missionaries go so far as legally to become a Muslim by repeating the *Shehadah* in front of witnesses.

C-6: Secret/underground believers who are believed to be Muslims by the Muslim community and who themselves say that they are Muslims.

Missionaries with a C-5 mindset have developed a theology that proposes that God created all religions in which there are kernels of truth. As the result of a subsequent apostasy, however, a remnant must be raised to restore the truth (just as happened with Christianity). God “desires a remnant in the Hindu community, in

the Buddhist community, in the secular developed community, in the Muslim community. Each of these must be culturally relevant and communicating effectively the truth for this time to that community.”<sup>11</sup>

The implication is that, following the Muslim pattern, a Hindu could be baptized without leaving Hinduism, and a secular person could be saved in the remnant that God is calling out in the secular community. This concept is based on an assumption for which there is no solid biblical support. The remnant concept of the C-5 approach is a radical departure from the historical Adventist understanding of the remnant as a body of believers who have “come out” of their religious communities (Rev. 14:6-12; 18:1-4) and have identified with a separate and visible group of people who have determined to be loyal to everything God has revealed—the remnant church (12:17). A missionary with a C-5 mindset reduces the church to what Islam can reasonably tolerate. This is an erosion of Christianity and an open form of syncretism, an approach that threatens the unity of the church as the body of Christ. With the existence of baptized believers who have not developed a full fellowship with other sister communities in the world, the stage has been set for a fragmented world church.

C-5 supporters have even made statements that seem to convey an official position of the Seventh-day

Adventist Church on this matter: “Adventists understand that in the great controversy between God and Satan, *God has acted* through a variety of people and nations to effect His purposes in history, and, further, that *God has been active in revealing truth through chosen messengers*, some of them known to us through writings that have been preserved under the guidance of God’s Spirit and others unknown to us today. In this context, it is understood that the original intent of Islam has in God’s purpose contributed to the *restoration of certain important truth[s]*.”<sup>12</sup>

Serious implicit assumptions in the preceding paragraph reflect the mindset of C-5 missionaries. The first is that God raised Islam to restore certain important truths. It is only within this context that the concept of a remnant within Islam after a “falling away” makes sense. This reasoning begins with a wrong assumption—that God created different religions.

A correct assumption, however, is that 600 years after Christ, Satan deliberately raised a movement that mixed truth and error in order to create an alternative religion to Christianity that currently has nearly 1.5 billion followers who deny what Jesus did on the Cross.

Since the days of Cain and Abel and throughout history, Satan has been very effective in using the approach of raising alternative reli-



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gions. "In all ages, philosophers and teachers have been presenting to the world theories by which to satisfy the soul's need. Every heathen nation has had its great teachers and religious systems offering some other means of redemption than Christ. The trend of their work is to rob God of that which is His own, both by creation and by redemption. And these false teachers rob man as well. Millions of human beings are bound down under false religions, in the bondage of slavish fear, of stolid indifference, toiling like beasts of burden, bereft of hope or joy or aspiration here, and with only a dull fear of the hereafter."<sup>13</sup>

Cain's offering had a kernel of truth in it, but his alternative approach missed the mark. Though kernels of truth may be found in various religious systems, they are not proof that the movement was raised by God, but an evidence that God was at work in spite of Satan's efforts to lead people away from the truth in its entirety.

A second implicit assumption in the paragraph is that God revealed truth through the writings of chosen messengers. At the end, this is a justification for a Muslim legally to remain in the mosque by repeating that "Allah is the only God and Mohammed is the messenger of God." The simple fact that Mohammed was exposed to Christianity and rejected it, and that his teachings contradicted previous inspired New Testament writings should be enough evidence for his rejection as a prophet (messenger) of God.

A third assumption behind that statement is that the Qur'an, written by a messenger of God and preserved under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is as inspired as the Bible. This assumption also provides the foundation for a remnant within Hinduism, Buddhism, and virtually any religious or secular movement in which kernels of truth may be found. A vague and wide understanding of inspiration may lead Roman Catholics to justify the role

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of “tradition,” or Mormons to stay in their church even after having known the gospel. This does not mean that kernels of truth found in the Qur'an may be utilized to attract Muslims to the message of Isa the Messiah.

Missionaries with a C-5 mindset do not represent the Adventist mission and message. A C-5 missionary (who believes that Islam is a true religion, that Mohammed was a messenger of God, and that the Qur'an is one of the holy writings) is a theological contradiction. A missionary with a C-4 mindset may, however, use C-5 strategies to lead non-believers to a point at which they may make a responsible decision for Jesus and His truth.

### **C-5 Strategy—The Strategic Perspective**

A third way to see the C-Scale is from a strategic perspective. Differ-

ent strategies should be followed for people in different stages of growth. The approach suggested in this article does not eliminate the usage of Islamic forms. A C-4 missionary (someone who wants to be faithful to the Scriptures and is not willing to compromise the integrity of the gospel) can use C-5 strategies (such as use of the Qur'an) to help a C-5 Muslim (who is still attending the mosque).

In an extended conversation in 2004 with an Adventist who works within the C-5 scale, he insisted that we should not aim to make an Adventist out of a Muslim and that his converts would remain in Islam. This person has theological problems relating to the doctrine of the church, the doctrine of the remnant, the doctrine of inspiration and revelation, and the doctrine of baptism. Though sometimes this is not clearly spelled out, this is in the background

of the FDIC approach.

Biblical examples do not justify the approaches of a C-5 missionary. Paul did use the synagogue to launch evangelism, and he circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:1-3). But 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 indicates that this does not mean that if Paul were alive today, he would advise Muslims to “remain in the condition in which [they were] called.” Though the doctrine of the synagogue was valid, the doctrine of the mosque is wrong. Though the teachings of the Law and the Prophets were the foundation for the New Testament, the teachings of the Qur’an negate biblical doctrines. Though Paul’s writings were based on teachings of the Old Testament, Mohammed’s writings were not based on the teachings of the New Testament. Islam cannot be equated with Judaism, nor the assumptions of C-5 missionaries with Paul’s mindset.

Missionaries *could* use the C-5 strategy in the Contextualization Spectrum to help Muslims arrive at an understanding of the gospel where they can make a responsible decision for Jesus and His church. When addressing the Epicurean and Stoic Greek philosophers, Paul began where the Athenians were as he made references to “the unknown God” (Acts 17:23, KJV); then he used C-5 strategies as he quoted from pagan Greek poets (vs. 28). Then he moved to the C-4 level as he forcefully confronted his hearers with the death and

resurrection of Jesus, even at the risk of suffering persecution.

A C-5 strategy is not an end in itself, but rather a transitional approach that aims to help Muslims (C-5 believers) become Christians (C-4 believers). These “followers of Isa the Messiah” still live within the community of Islam, legally and religiously. Eventually they may arrive at a point at which, individually or as a community, they will become aware that their identity as “followers of Isa” makes them part of the universal body of Christ and, specifically, Seventh-day Adventists with a Muslim background.

People who are still at a stage in their process toward conversion at which they are not ready to make a responsible decision to join the body of Christ are not ready for baptism. Of course missionaries must meet people where they are. But they should not baptize Muslims who still believe that Islam is the true religion, accept the Qur’an as the Word of God, believe that Mohammed was a true prophet, and think they are still Muslims—just to help them move toward Christianity.

Only people who understand the implications of their baptism should be baptized. According to Mark 16:15, Christians must “preach the gospel to every creature” (KJV). In the “Great Commission,” however, Jesus asked His followers to make disciples by “teaching them to observe all things”

(Matt. 28:20, KJV). In obedience to the Great Commission, Paul states, “I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27, KJV). As a result of evangelism in the early church, baptized believers “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship” (2:42, NKJV). Those who were being saved were “added to the church” (vs. 47, KJV). The guidelines from the *Church Manual* are in harmony with the Scriptures.<sup>14</sup> All policies related to the General Conference should be in harmony with them.

There is an appropriate use of C-5 strategies. These strategies should be viewed, however, as catalysts for movement into the next stage of the scale. The underlying issue is whether the use of C-5 strategies is an outreach technique or is the mindset of the missionary. A mindset that seeks and is willing to accept and baptize converts who remain at this level is not faithful to the Scriptures or to the church. An Adventist missionary or an Adventist sending organization should not compromise the integrity of the gospel for pragmatic purposes (i.e., to see church growth where there has been no success). A missionary with a C-5 mindset does not adequately represent the Seventh-day Adventist theology and message. The search for and use of strategies should be creative, but they should be based on a solid foundation—faithfulness to the Scriptures. □

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- <sup>3</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, “Syncretism: Mission and Missionary Induced?” in *Contextualization and Syncretism*, pp. 71-98.
- <sup>4</sup> *Evangelism*, p. 484.
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- <sup>6</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, “Developing New Church Structures for More Effective Mission, Nurture, and Growth of New Believers,” *Global Center for Adventist-Muslim Relations*, October 1997.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
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- <sup>9</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 95; *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 128.
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- <sup>13</sup> *The Desire of Ages*, p. 478.
- <sup>14</sup> *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, pp. 30, 31.