

# God's Footprints in the Rubble: Adventist Muslim Relations During Crisis

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Why do they hate us so much? What have we done? Does the Koran really command Muslims to kill Christians? Did Islam really force conversions by the sword? What are they trying to achieve? Is Allah the same God as the Christian God?

Despite assurances on both sides and because of militant rhetoric by some who call themselves Muslim, these questions hang in the air as dark clouds of doubt and distrust. How do we, as children of God, respond to these questions?

First, we must differentiate between a faith system itself and those followers of that system who would hijack that faith, distorting the pic-

ture of God, all for their own power agendas or even for a religious agenda. Throughout history terrorism, violence, and intolerance have not been limited to any one faith system. Essentially all faith systems espouse peace, tolerance, and respect. However, it is a fact of history that more blood has been shed in so-called religious wars than under any other banner. Rather than a force for peace and security, religion has often been a force for hatred, intolerance, and bloodshed.

Most on all sides would agree that violence and force are a serious misuse of religion. It should also be noted that those of us who have lived and worked in Muslim countries have many dear Muslim friends who are no less concerned about the current tensions than we.

What then drives certain ones to so distort the basic message of a faith system into justifying such terrible atrocities as we witnessed on September 11, 2001?

One cannot understand the present tensions without some awareness of the history of relations between Muslims and Christians. Terrorism is a response to increasing tension, frustration, and grievances—real or imagined. I will attempt here a brief historical summary drawing from sev-



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eral respected sources in an attempt to provide the background for current tensions. Admittedly, because of the multiple factors involved, it's risky to generalize, as is necessary in a summary such as this. There are invariably exceptions to the broad statements I will make.

### **A Horrible Past**

A mere 400 years from its beginning, Christianity was entangled in theological controversies that were of little or no interest to the common person, controversies that carried the burden of political agendas instead of a clear spiritual agenda. There was a penchant for enforcing the decisions of a few on

political and social as well (Goddard 2000, 37-38). Thus the use of political power to the point of force for religious ends had become established and acclaimed early on in Christianity, with all its tragic consequences. Eusebius, a bishop and the leading historian of the early fourth century, saw the emperor as God's chosen vessel to bring about the reign of Christianity on earth (Eusebius 1999, 369-370). That attitude was later to be mirrored in Muslim governments and is evident in the current situation in which religion is invoked as the justification for violence and political agendas.

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all the believers. Excommunication and counterexcommunication were common. Elimination of heretics became religious sport. Jews and dissenting Christians became targets for the "orthodox." The Eastern Christian church (Nestorian) was excommunicated and severely persecuted by the Western (Roman) and Byzantine (Greek) churches. This left Christianity deeply divided.

These schisms were not only theological, resulting in excommunication and persecution, but po-

ing situation, in which many of them welcomed the Muslim rule as liberation from the oppressive Byzantine and Sassanid rule (see Moffett, 1998). "Under the stimulus of Islam," says Philip K. Hitti (1958, 143), "the East now awoke and reasserted itself after a millennium of Western domination. Moreover, the tribute exacted by the new conquerors was even less than that exacted by the old, and the conquered could now pursue their religious practices with more

freedom and less interference.”

Admittedly, this is quite a different picture than is commonly portrayed, and therefore sheds considerable light regarding the background to current perceptions in the Muslim world. And Moffet (1998) makes the following observation regarding conditions later prevailing under early Islamic rule:

Under the patriarchal caliphs and all through the turbulent years of the civil wars, apart from the killings and horrors to be expected in any war, treatment of Christians in the conquered territories of Persia and Byzantine Syria proved to be remarkably generous (338).

### **The Crusades**

Despite Islam's relatively “generous treatment” of Eastern Christians, it soon added them to the list of “heretics” and “infidels.” Subsequently Christianity stooped to its lowest point as waves of Crusaders surged toward the Middle East to purge Christianity of heretics and eliminate the “infidel” Jews and Muslims, while liberating the Holy Land. Some would argue that the first Crusade, particularly, was a truly religious movement in order to open free access to the Middle East holy sites for pilgrims. Admittedly there was a religious motivation, and the Crusade was conducted as a “just war” and a pilgrimage. However, the horrific stories told of atrocities against Christians in the Middle East, in order to stimulate sufficient emotion to launch the Crusade, were beyond reality.

But the picture they carried, of a

persecuted Christian population in Palestine, united in adversity and awaiting deliverance by Rome was false. Although Muslims by this time formed a small majority in Syria and Palestine, they lived with the Christians in a climate of coexistence and much less tension than Europeans wanted to believe. . . . The condition of the local Christians under Muslim rule had certainly not deteriorated to the extent that an armed intervention was necessary to rescue them. Indeed the Fatimids of Egypt, who at this time governed Jerusalem, maintained ‘a greater level of tolerance than any society then practiced’ (Courbage and Fargues 1998, 45).

Crusaders were promised full remission of sin by joining the Crusade (Runciman 1951, 1:108-109). Thousands of children were sent on crusading expeditions from which only a few returned (3:139-144). When the first Crusade succeeded in gaining control of Jerusalem in 1099, not one Muslim or Jewish civilian was left alive in the city (1:287).

On balance, it is worthy of note that not all Christians supported the activities of the Crusaders: “Many . . . Christians were horrified by what had been done” (Runciman, 1:187) Nevertheless, the atrocity had a profound effect on the “tangled politics of the time” and lingered as a vivid memory in the minds of the Muslims. In bold contrast to this is the response of Saladin (Salah el-Din), the Muslim leader, when he regained control of Jerusalem in 1187. Once he had control of the city, he ordered all killing to stop. Not one Jew or Christian civilian was harmed and no property was damaged (2:466).

While it is true that early on Islam had divided the world into *dar-al-Islam* (“the house of Islam”) and *dar-al-harb* (“the house of war”), those nations and peoples that refused to convert to Islam or refused to accept Muslim rule), and jihad was adopted as the latent or openly declared position toward the countries of *dar-al-harb*, in countries where Muslim rule was established, the rights of non-Muslims were generally protected.

“By medieval standards,” says Hugh Goddard (2001, 68),

the Muslim treatment of Jews and Christians was relatively tolerant and liberal, though it was clearly, by modern standards, still discriminatory to some extent. Comparisons can only fairly be made with other medieval societies, and on this basis the Muslim world scores extremely well.

To summarize in the words of A. S. Ahmed,

The memory of the Crusades lingers in the Middle East and colours Muslim perceptions of Europe. It is the memory of an aggressive, backward and religiously fanatic Europe. This historical memory would be reinforced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as imperial Europeans once again arrived to subjugate and colonize territories in the Middle East. Unfortunately this legacy of bitterness is overlooked by most Europeans when thinking of the Crusades (as cited in Hillenbrand 2000, 590).

This history forms the backdrop for the subsequent buildup of grievances in the Muslim world that is driving the current militancy. As Christianity had come through the

Reformation and the subsequent Renaissance, the Christian West began to exert more power over Middle Eastern affairs, resulting in the colonization of the Middle East after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. While generally “enlightenment” was the progressive context of Christianity from 1500 onward, Islam was engaged in its own internal tensions as it wrestled with the reasons and remedies for its decline and how to deal with the Western colonization of its territories.

Within Islam the struggle increased between those advocating following *taqleed* (a return to the traditional understanding from the Muslim scholars) as the way to renewal of Islam, and those who saw the way to renewal as a general use by all Muslims of *ijtihad* (struggling to understand the principles of the text and then deciding on how this should be applied in the current context).

The struggle within Islam has been not unlike the struggle within some Christian communities. However, the outcome has had a significant effect on the current development of the extreme fundamentalist segments of Islam. Essentially *taqlid* has won out over the feared result of *ijtihad*, that personal whims and eccentricities of anyone could carry the day (Fareed, 2001).

### Muslim Perceptions

The resentment has been building as the foreign policies of the West regarding the Middle East over the past century and more--specifically the past half century--are seen by the majority of Muslims as building on the history we have noted

above and therefore as a continuation of the Crusades in which the West is discriminating against Islam. Among the perceived grievances, one might include the Palestinian situation; the presence of foreign troops on Muslim "holy" ground (in Saudi Arabia); and the death of children related to the sanctions on Iraq. Westerners may see these as only political issues. However, the average Muslim views them also as religious issues, and the militant Muslim clearly sees them as fanatical Christianity seeking to dominate and even destroy the Muslim faith--a continuation of the Crusades.

ing some of the shame Muslims have suffered. As a result, the Muslim world, to some degree, has "circled the wagons." They have united against what they perceive as a common enemy. The increasing frustration has driven many into fundamentalism as a solution. Since they have nothing to lose and are promised paradise with martyrdom, it has driven some to extreme militant and terrorist actions. Moderate Muslims, on the other hand, find themselves in an increasingly difficult position as they try to clarify and define what they consider to be the true peaceful Islam against the heightened emotions on both sides.

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An additional element in this volatile mix is the Muslim's concern for preserving traditional values in the face of the hedonism and materialism exported by the West into their very homes through television and video. This is seen as eating out the heart of the faith. Benjamin Barber provides an enlightening analysis of these issues in his book *Jihad vs. McWorld*. Although his analysis is primarily secular, it provides an understanding of the issues in the current conflict and forces us to reevaluate more objectively the forces on both sides of the growing chasm (1996, 5).

In this context militant acts against the West are seen as remov-

Many are speaking out, however. Since the September 11, 2001, tragedy, an organization called *Muslims Against Terrorism* has been formed ([www.matusa.org](http://www.matusa.org)) with the express purpose of not allowing the extremists to define Islam by default.

This summary explanation is in no way intended to justify recent terrorist atrocities. But it does form the backdrop for current events. There is absolutely no justification for terrorist activities and human rights abuses from any source that sacrifice innocent lives. Evil knows no boundaries of religion or creed and is still evil, regardless of where it resides. But the issues reviewed

here are essential for us to understand, as they form the background for the present situation. For only as we understand the reasons for the hatred of some and the distrust of others in the Muslim world can we begin to relate constructively to those in Islam who are open to mutual respect and understanding. And there are many.

From what we've seen thus far, it's clear that any faith system used for political ends (or that links with political power to achieve its ends) results in intolerance, subjugation, and persecution of dissenters. Both

have had increasing influence.

Some Christians would contend that Allah is not the same God as the God of the Bible and therefore see no basis for discussion with the Muslim on spiritual matters. This is an unfortunate understanding. The argument goes that the Muslim concept of Allah is different, and that Allah was the name of the moon god in pre-Islamic times. First, it is clear that Allah in the Koran is the creator God (Surah 7:54). He is the "master of the Day of Judgment" (Surah 1:4), the "Lord of the Uni-

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Christianity and Islam, to varying degrees and at different times, have embraced the "unholy alliance" of religion and political power.

### **Christianity's Response**

In the past two centuries, while Christianity has generally moved away from violence and medievalism and embraced tolerance, Islam has been unable to recapture the more progressive values of its "golden age," and the militant voices advocating a traditional and exclusivist understanding of Islam

verse" (Surah 1:2). He is loving, merciful, and "oft-forgiving" (Surah 3:31). Further, the word "Allah," even in pre-Islamic times, was always used for the supreme God of all the gods (Arabia was very polytheistic prior to Islam). Muhammad adopted the word that was the known word for God and used it to mean the only God, no other. It is a common practice in translating the Bible into a new language to use the words that exist in the language to describe the new concepts being presented or

to describe and name this Creator God that they have not been aware of. It is important to also note that one of the Hebrew words for God is "El" or "Eloah," which is the literary cognate of the Arabic "Allah." "El" is found in early Ugaritic texts as the supreme god of the Canaanite pantheon. This did not prevent Abraham, and those after, from appropriating it as one of the commonly used names for "Yahweh." One last observation: Allah is the word for God used by some 17 million Arabic-speaking Christians and is the word for God used in the Arabic Bible translations.

### **How Should Adventists Relate to the Present Events?**

First of all, it is a humbling notion to realize that any faith system, Christian or non-Christian, can develop toxic elements that lead to feelings of superiority and exclusivity, intolerance to others of different belief, to the extent of isolating them (or ourselves from them). Or dehumanizing them, which then opens the door for discrimination--and even violence in the name of truth. It is a problem of the human condition.

What are some of the elements of "toxic faith"?<sup>1</sup> Faith systems that place more emphasis on control of the member's life than on compassion; attitudes that would arrogantly proclaim "we have all the truth" and others have none (in contrast to an attitude of "we can learn from each other"); legalistic religion (more emphasis on right behavior than right relationships); faith sys-

tems that spend more energy on defending the truth than on proclaiming and demonstrating a grace-filled healing ministry; systems that see themselves as a club for the righteous rather than a hospital for sick and broken to receive healing; those who would pass judgment before trying to understand the reasons behind the behavior of another.

All of these are pitfalls for the saints that can form the seeds of intolerance and hatred, and their unfortunate ends. It's one thing to be quietly confident that we are God's people and winsomely draw others into our fellowship, and quite another to use "truth" as a means of defining ourselves versus those who do not have "it," and thereby move toward attitudes of superiority and even a willingness to use various forms of force to achieve our objectives.

### **Additional Suggestions**

Seventh-day Adventism is a monotheistic faith, the same as that outlined in the Old Testament and followed by Abraham. Islam also traces its monotheistic heritage back to Abraham through Ishmael.

Above all people we should avoid stereotyping Muslims based on news clips or on the simplistic conclusion that religion is the only cause of the current conflicts.

Adventists understand their unique role in the end-time as a calling out and warning message, to prepare people for the coming of Jesus. We are a world movement declaring this message to all peoples--Christians, post-Christians, secular, moderns, postmoderns,

Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Bahais, Shintus, Communists, believers and unbelievers alike. Because it is “a faith and worship that would have in it nothing of caste or country, a faith that would be adapted to all peoples, all nations, all classes of men,” it should not be deterred by political or catastrophic events (White 1940, 820).

Adventists trace their spiritual heritage more directly to those groups of Bible believers who were persecuted by the mainline Christian churches. Groups such as the “primitive Christians” in Britain,

tianity through earthly governments over other “nonbelievers” (White 1940, 509).

Our commission is clear. “Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples” (Matt 28:19, TEV) particularly focusing on the “eternal message of Good News” intended for “every race, tribe, language, and nation” to “honor God and praise his greatness! For the time has come for him to judge all people. Worship him who made heaven, earth, sea, and the springs of water!” (Rev 14:6-7, TEV).

Our job, therefore, is to call all, Muslims included, to a certain qual-

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Anabaptists, Waldenses, and others of the Eastern churches in the Middle East who were excommunicated by the Roman and Byzantine churches (White 1950, 62-64). These groups, constituting the “church in the wilderness” of Revelation 12, suffered from the Crusades along with Muslims and Jews (a point that should not be ignored in our relations with Muslims).

Adventists would do well to differentiate their faith from the triumphalistic attitudes of other groups that see the “kingdom of God” as the “reigning” of Chris-

ity of faith, a certainty of salvation, and an understanding of the implications of God’s end-time warning.

Further, as God’s Spirit and general protection is gradually withdrawn from the earth, and evil forces are allowed to show their true character, we must stand as a healing force, a force for reconciliation (between peoples, and between humanity and God); (2 Cor 5:17-21). We are “ambassadors” of reconciliation, mediating God’s love, healing, and forgiveness in a world fracturing from selfishness, revenge, hatred, and distrust.

The present situation is characterized by revenge and counterrevenge that is the only human response in shame/honor societies. This only produces an escalation of tragic events. The Adventist understanding of the great controversy and how God is solving the problem of sin (shame) in His universe is a message that is desperately needed at this time.

The only cure for the present cycle of revenge is to understand and accept for ourselves this way of restoring us to honor and then mediating such a picture of God to those sinking into the enemy's way of dealing with shame.

Adventists should be in the forefront of relieving suffering, mediating conflict, and facilitating reconciliation. God's footprints are in the rubble of a broken world. It is our high privilege to walk in His steps as we minister His grace (White 1942, 106).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Steve Arterburn and Jack Felton introduced the term *toxic faith* in their book of the same title published in 1991. Following on the same theme are two more recent books: *More Jesus less religion*, again by Arterburn and Felton, and *Soul survivor: How my faith survived the church*, by Philip Yancey

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