

## SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST APPROACHES TO OTHER RELIGIONS: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM 1930–1950, PART I

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Seventh-day Adventists have been involved in worldwide mission efforts since the 1870s. By the 1890s the Seventh-day Adventist Church had turned worldwide mission into a major focus to “reach the world” with the three angels’ message.<sup>1</sup> As a result of this worldwide push it was inevitable that Adventists would begin encountering other religions in the Middle East, Southern Asia, Southeastern Asia, and throughout Africa. Much like the Christians who had preceded them by nearly a decade, this was a time of shock and bewilderment. Often the missionaries retreated from these encounters and relegated themselves to engaging with other Christian denominations.<sup>2</sup>

The developments, trends, and trajectories of Adventist approaches to world religions have been largely left untold.<sup>3</sup> How has the church reached

<sup>1</sup>For more on these early years of Adventist mission, see Bruce L. Bauer, “Congregational and Mission Structures and How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Has Related to Them” (DMiss diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1982); Borge Schantz, “The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Missionary Thought: Contemporary Appraisal” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1983); Stefan Höschele, *From the End of the World to the Ends of the Earth: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Missiology* (Nürnberg: Verlag für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft, 2004).

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<sup>2</sup>Baldur Ed Pfeiffer points out that often early Adventist missionaries in the Middle East worked only among ex-patriot workers and avoided the local populace; see *The European Seventh-day Adventist Mission in the Middle East 1879–1939*, *European University Studies* 161 (Frankfurt: Lang, 1981), 49–53.

<sup>3</sup>There are a few brief works that are relevant to this study. See Stefan Höschele, “The Emerging Adventist Theology of Religions Discourse: Participants, Positions, Particularities,” in *A Man of Passionate Reflection: A Festschrift Honoring Jerald Whitehouse*, ed. Bruce L. Bauer (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, Andrews University, 2011), 355–376; idem, *Interchurch and Interfaith Relations: Seventh-day Adventist Statements and Documents*, *Adventistica* 10 (Frankfurt: Lang, 2010); Richard McEdward, “A Brief Overview of Adventist Witness among Muslims,” in *A Man of Passionate Reflection: A Festschrift Honoring Jerald Whitehouse*, ed. Bruce L. Bauer (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, Andrews University, 2011), 237–252; Gary Krause, “Adventism among the World Religions,” in *A Man of Passionate Reflection: A Festschrift Honoring Jerald Whitehouse*, ed. Bruce L. Bauer (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, Andrews University, 2011), 225–236. Krause’s study skips over the period covered in this article.

its current understandings and approaches to other religions? What role has the wider Christian world played in influencing Adventist approaches? What can be learned from the past encounters with other religions? These are all questions that this two-part article moves toward answering.

Because Adventist international mission did not get started until the late nineteenth century, this study will begin to survey Adventist approaches to other religions from the 1930s onwards. While there would be a great deal of value in looking at Adventist approaches in the years prior to 1930, this study is focused on the more mature Adventist approaches. One reason for this is that because the other religions were so different and new for the Adventist missionaries, Adventist thinking prior to the 1930s lacks the depth it would gain with time. Slowly this would change, and by the 1930s Adventists had forty or more years to develop their understandings and approaches to other religions. In the wider Christian world this was also an important time in the understandings and approaches to other religions.

The aim of this study is related to the three questions noted above. Firstly, it is to help create a more accurate understanding of the historical developments of Christian approaches to other religions. This is important in that it can create a more informed attitude toward the current approaches the church is involved in. There is no doubt that the church has faced major tensions connected with the understandings and approaches toward other religions that some leaders have taken. Understanding the historical developments may help to ease the tension by showing the progression behind the current approaches.

Secondly, it is valuable to understand how Adventists have been influenced by the wider Christian movement. It is the assumption of some that Adventists are unaffected by the wider Christian movement in theology and mission. This study will test that type of thinking in the area of mission and other religions. This can aid the church in understanding better the Adventist Church's relation to other Christians, as well as help to isolate some of the areas where the Adventist Church has been influenced most and where it may have taken the lead.

Thirdly, it has been noted by many historians, both secular and religious, that history often contains important lessons that can be of value in understanding present challenges.<sup>4</sup> This study will attempt to highlight some important elements in the historical approaches of Adventists to other religions which can be informative for the church today.

The scope of this study is specifically related to world religions, and in order to delimit the study even more, it is focused on Adventist approaches to Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

The main resources utilized in this study were primary documents (books, periodicals, meeting minutes, etc.) from the time period relevant to the study. One of the main databases utilized was the website of the Office of

<sup>4</sup>For a succinct explanation of the importance of studying mission history, see Paul E. Pierson, *The Dynamics of Christian Mission: History Through Missiological Perspective* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2009), 11–13.

Archives, Statistics, and Research at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>5</sup> Word searches were conducted in major Adventist periodicals, such as *Ministry*, *Review and Herald*, and other denominational papers from that archive. Terms such as Islam/Mohammedan/Muslim, Hindu/Hinduism, and Buddhist/Buddhism were the main search terms. Other books, MA theses, and doctoral dissertations were also consulted.

#### *The Historical Context*

By the 1930s most Protestant denominations had been involved in global missions for more than one hundred years. They had been encountering other religious groups for the duration of this time; therefore Protestants had published much on the topic of other religions by the 1930s. In the decades leading up to 1930 there had been major trends in theological thinking that built on the theory of evolution. Out of this came theological understandings of other religions that have been labelled as fulfilment theologies. These viewed other religions aside from Christianity as lower forms of religion that contained elements of truth that needed to be dug out and cleaned off. Then they could be “fulfilled” in Christianity, which is what they were evolving toward. The famous Edinburgh mission conference of 1910 was influenced by these views held by a number of influential missionaries.<sup>6</sup>

Fulfilment theology, while not necessarily representing the majority of missionaries during the early part of the century, was rapidly becoming more and more popular. It had its roots in certain theologians who, as mentioned above, worked under the influence of the evolutionary theory in vogue at the time. They also worked within the worldview of Western progress and “civilization” that was being spread around the world. J. N. Farquhar’s major work, *The Crown of Hinduism*, first published in 1913, is often recognized as the most advanced and thought-out exposition of fulfilment theology.<sup>7</sup> This work would continue to have an impact, as would the basic fulfilment theology method, for many years to come.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research. “Online Archives,” <https://www.documents.adventistarchives.org>.

<sup>6</sup>For a very helpful study on this, see Kenneth Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions, 1846–1914* (London: Epworth, 1995). There were also some Seventh-day Adventist representatives at Edinburgh 1910. For more on this, see Keith A. Francis, “Ecumenism or Distinctiveness? Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes to the World Missionary Conference of 1910,” in *Unity and Diversity in the Church*, ed. R. N. Swanson, SCH 32 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 477–487.

<sup>7</sup>J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913). For more on the life of Farquhar, see Eric J. Sharpe, *Not to Destroy But to Fulfil: The Contribution of J. N. Farquhar to Protestant Missionary Thought in India before 1914*, Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia 5 (Uppsala, Sweden: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1965).

<sup>8</sup>In India this model continued to be utilized by many Indian Christian theologians. It has since been revived by a few current mission thinkers such as

As Europe was engulfed in World War I, many of the high ideals of progressive thinkers were shattered by the reality that the West was not really evolving toward a utopian future. This had its repercussions for missions as well, and more specifically for the understanding of other world religions. Prior to World War I many Christians believed other religions were dying out and would eventually be eclipsed by the more “civilized” Christianity the missionaries were propagating.<sup>9</sup> However, it was beginning to become clearer that these religions were not going away. In fact, in many cases, they were actually going through periods of renaissance and renewal that would make them stronger than ever.

At the Jerusalem Mission council of 1928 another consensus view emerged that was heavily influenced by W. E. Hocking. The council consensus statement recognized much value in other religions, even going so far as to say that the spiritual value found in other religions, including “secular civilization,” were part of “the one Truth.”<sup>10</sup> Hocking later authored a major study on missions which included several chapters dealing with other religions. His primary conclusion, in consultation with a number of other theologians and mission workers of the time, was that all religions should work together to move the world toward a more peaceful existence.<sup>11</sup> This became a seminal work that garnered a number of reactions over the next several years.

At the same time a larger group of missionaries maintained a view that had survived for many centuries. They believed that other religions were satanic

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Richard Leroy Hivner and Ivan M. Satyavrata, with nuances that separate it from the early twentieth-century works, although both Hivner and Satyavrata draw from those earlier works. See Richard Leroy Hivner, “The Christian Society for the Study of Hinduism, 1940–1956: Interreligious Engagement in Mid-twentieth Century India,” (PhD diss., University of South Africa, 2011); Ivan M. Satyavrata, *God Has Not Left Himself without Witness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

<sup>9</sup>For an example of the type of language being utilized in relation to mission and world evangelization prior to World War I, see World Missionary Conference 1910, *Report of Commission I: Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World* (New York: Revell, 1910), 1–49. For more on the change from language of triumphalism to more sober reality concerning the world and mission after World War I, see Andrew F. Walls, “Commission One and the Church’s Transforming Century,” in *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now*, ed. David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 30–32; Kosuke Koyama, “Commission One After a Century of Violence: The Search for a Larger Christ,” in *ibid.*, 41–52.

<sup>10</sup>International Missionary Council, *The Christian Life and Message in Relation to Non-Christian Systems*, vol. 1 of *Report of the Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council, March 24–April 8, 1928* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), 491. I am indebted to David J. Bosch for leading me to this quotation. For more on the importance of this council, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Mission Theology*, 20th anniversary ed., American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 473.

<sup>11</sup>William E. Hocking, *Re-thinking Missions: A Laymen’s Inquiry after 100 Years* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932).

and thus needed to be removed completely and replaced by Christianity. This was the predominant view of Christianity, although by the 1930s was becoming more tempered by the reality that other religions were neither as bad as once thought nor were they disappearing.

In 1938 a major world mission's conference was held in Madras, India, known as the Tambaram conference.<sup>12</sup> Probably the most important enduring legacy of this conference was the book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* by Hendrik Kraemer.<sup>13</sup> He forcefully presented a view heavily influenced by the neo-orthodoxy of the day. In this work Kraemer argued that all religion was negative in that it could not accurately express the revelation of God. He critiqued fulfillment theology with his own argument for a radical break from other religions. He did see some hints of truth in other religions but these were dramatically eclipsed, in his view, by the work of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

Kraemer's book was like a bombshell in the world of Christian missions and it garnered numerous reactions both positive and negative.<sup>15</sup> It was in many ways a clear and concise view of other religions that would change the conversation from that point forward. This was the culmination of many years of thinking and debating the issue of other religions as they related to Christianity among Protestant denominations.

The divide between modern liberal theology and fundamental conservative theology had also taken its toll by the 1930s. Many Christians found themselves confronted with a choice to join one of these two competing ideologies. This impacted mission as well. Hocking wrote that missions, as it had been understood up until the 1930s, was no longer appropriate.

<sup>12</sup>The conference received mixed reviews from Adventists. There were no Adventists invited to the conference, so their reactions were purely from an outside view. For samples of negative reactions, see R. B. Thurber, "International Missionary Conference," *Ministry* 12.4 (1939): 14–15; "The World Missionary Conference," *The Oriental Watchman Herald of Health* 15.2 (1939): 36–37. For a more positive assessment, see E. D. Thomas, "No Time to Lose," *Eastern Tidings* 35.13 (1 July 1940): 4–5.

<sup>13</sup>The one reference to this book in Adventist literature is very positive. In 1948, W. P. Bradley—who at the time was an Associate Vice President of the General Conference—said about the book: "It seems that it would be a good book to have in our college libraries and also available to our leading missionaries abroad" (W. P. Bradley, "Gleanings," *Eastern Tidings* 43.2 [15 January 1948]: 8). This lends credence to the trend in Adventism to move more towards an exclusivistic understanding towards other religions.

<sup>14</sup>Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938). For more on Kraemer's missiological and theological development leading up to Tambaram, see Carl F. Hallencreutz, *Kraemer towards Tambaram* (Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1966).

<sup>15</sup>Some of these reactions were published in the first volume of the Tambaram Madras Series. See International Missionary Council, *The Authority of the Faith: International Missionary Council Meeting at Tambaram, Madras*, Tambaram Series 1 (London, Oxford University Press, 1939).

Ecumenical movements were moving away from the mission focus that they had begun with. As a result many fundamentalists began moving away from the mainline Protestant groups.

The wider Christian attitudes toward other religions by the 1940s had grown more and more complex with a wide variety of views being discussed. While it is beyond the scope of this study to go into the historical backgrounds in depth, it is important to keep in mind that this was a time of foment and change in many ways, including how other religions were understood.

Seventh-day Adventists, on the other hand, had only about forty years of mission encounters with world religions to reflect on. In many ways the Adventist Church was playing catch-up with the wider Christian movement. The next section will focus on the Adventist approach to other religions.

#### *Seventh-day Adventists and World Religions: 1930–1950*

While the wider Christian world was engaging in debates on whether or not mission was still a valid enterprise, the Adventist Church was heavily engaged in mission and developing its early approaches to other religions. Through the first four to five decades of Adventist mission there were some engagements with other religions, but these were limited. Studies on the beginnings of Adventist mission outside of the United States from the 1870s onward have noted that much of the focus in mission was on working among other Christians. This would remain the norm for most of the decades leading up to the time period of this study. Bruce Bauer and Borge Schantz both wrote doctoral dissertations that attempt to show some of the key developments of Adventist mission from the late nineteenth century into the early part of the twentieth.<sup>16</sup> These studies shed some light on the lack of approaches to other religions during this time period. The 1930s reveal a shift in this general trend, with more emphasis being placed on other religions.

Organizing the data gathered in this research posed a difficult challenge, because of the wide variety of sources and concepts being gleaned over this period. As a result the following sections are divided into three primary categories: (1) key moments and events, (2) key people, and (3) general trends. These three categories will be dealt with in order, the first category in Part I and the last two in Part II of this article series.

#### *Key Moments and Events*

In 1923, W. K. Ising, formerly an Adventist missionary in Palestine, made an extensive trip around the Middle East and then wrote a book detailing the trip. This book was published by the Pacific Press Publishing Association with the title *Among the Arabs*. The preface reads, “We learn much about the Arabs and their customs and mode of living, with a little of the Jews and Christians. The experiences given are fresh and first-hand. . . . The little book is interesting, informative, even apart from the better story, that Arabian

<sup>16</sup>See Bauer, “Congregational and Mission Structures;” Borge Schantz, “Development.”

hearts are open to the blessed life-giving gospel.”<sup>17</sup> This was, in many ways, the beginning of a very fruitful and thought-changing time for Adventist missions in the Middle East. Ising would become a strong supporter of more focused ministries and mission to Muslims in the coming years. The book itself contains very little about mission; in many ways it was simply a travelogue, more like an ethnographic manuscript than a mission book. But this was indicative of the times; Adventist missionaries were beginning to sense the wider religious world in a new way, and in many cases all they could do was describe what they were seeing.

While this is not necessarily a major moment in the history of Adventist approaches to other religions, it does serve to illustrate what many Adventist missionaries were doing at that time. Miss V. C. Chilton, an Adventist missionary in India, wrote a similar book, only with more narratives, about India entitled *The Sigh of the Orient*, which came out the same year.<sup>18</sup> Adventist missionaries were being confronted with worldviews that they were totally unfamiliar with and unready for. As a result all they could do at first was attempt to understand these adherents of other religions and report on them. Many of the early Adventist periodical articles that deal with other religions are nothing more than mere descriptors of these “strange” religions.

This type of travelogue reporting would continue for a number of years. Even as late as 1948 Francis D. Nichol took an “air journey” around the world to learn about the “Adventist mission activities and the customs, habits, and daily life of the people of Europe, the Middle East, Egypt and Ethiopia.”<sup>19</sup> These travelogues are important because they were, in many ways, the only way the average Adventist member in North America and Europe would encounter other religions. But by the 1930s Adventists were also beginning to think more carefully about other religions from a mission standpoint.

#### The Biennial Council of the South Asia Division: 1932–1933

In Poona, India, from 30 December 1932 to 8 January 1933, a council was held, with attendees from all over the Southern Asia Division of Seventh-day Adventists. This council was attended by M. E. Kern, Associate Secretary of the General Conference. He wrote a couple of articles that came out in the *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* several months after the council, that reveal some of the major issues the division was facing in relation to other religions.

In the issue of the *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* that was published on 8 June 1933, Kern gave an overview of the council. In this overview he used the following language to describe the challenges faced by

<sup>17</sup>W. K. Ising, *Among the Arabs* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1924), 5–6.

<sup>18</sup>V. C. Chilton, *The Sigh of the Orient* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1924). Most of the chapters of this book are biographical narratives meant to help the reader better understand the cultural setting of India.

<sup>19</sup>Francis D. Nichol, *Letters from Far Lands* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1948), cover page.

missionaries in India at this time: “If ever a group of workers needed wisdom and power from God, it is those who day by day face the indifference and self-satisfaction of Buddhism, the ignorance and superstition of Hinduism, and the militant bigotry of Mohammedanism.”<sup>20</sup> This was not very complementary language and in many ways did not reflect the actual discussions that took place at the council as will be shown below. What it does demonstrate is the predominate understanding that Adventist leaders held concerning other religions at this time.

*The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* issue that was published the following week on 15 June 1933 gave a much more detailed description of the proceedings. This was also written by Kern, but with less colorful commentary and more reporting. The article says that “once a day . . . the workers discussed problems of the work . . . such problems as: ‘How to Present Christianity to Hindus, Mohammedans, and Buddhists,’ . . . ‘Studying the Language, Religious Beliefs, and Customs of the People,’ . . . ‘Requirements Concerning the Giving Up of Previous Customs and Habits.’”<sup>21</sup> The challenge of engaging with other religions took center stage at this Division council.

Several discussions held at this council were often on topics related to other religions. For example, the question of what to do with married women who were devout followers of Jesus but whose husbands were either Muslim or Hindu? They could not be baptized openly so how should the church proceed to minister to them? No final conclusions are given in the article, leading the reader to believe that the challenge was obvious but the solutions were difficult.<sup>22</sup>

There were two other issues that were of even more prominence in the meetings and received more space in the article published on the 15 June 1933 and a subsequent article. The first was a controversial topic on what should be required of new converts, who came from other religious backgrounds. R. E. Loasby, another important figure in this research, led out in this discussion. Loasby made the astute observation that “some Western forms and methods as applied to the work of the Christian religion, are not altogether adapted to India. It is suggested, therefore, that Indian and Oriental customs be interfered with in as restricted a degree as is consistent with the faithful maintenance of Bible standards. To Christianize does not necessarily mean to Westernize.”<sup>23</sup> Loasby went on to describe some local

<sup>20</sup>M. E. Kern, “Southern Asia Division Biennial Council,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 110.23 (8 June 1933): 17. Future references to the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* will be abbreviated with *AR*. This overview article does include one other interesting fact: according to Kern, the periodical *The Oriental Watchman* did not have a large readership at this time, but of the subscribers it did have “60 percent” of the them were “non-Christian” (*ibid.*, 18). This, of course, would be very difficult to verify.

<sup>21</sup>M. E. Kern, “Southern Asia Division Roundtable Discussions,” *AR* 110.24 (15 June 1933): 9.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.



practices he felt were contrary to biblical standards but also listed other practices, such as the wearing of jewelry that signified marriage, that he felt should be allowed. In many ways Loasby held views different from his fellow Adventists in this regard, and much of his advice went unheeded.<sup>24</sup>

In the subsequent issue of the *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* that was published on 22 June 1933, M. E. Kern published a follow up article on the council. This article was focused on the discussions pertaining to other religions, namely Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism. L. G. Mookerjee led out in the discussions on Hindus. His grandfather had been a Hindu before becoming a Christian many years earlier. Mookerjee pointed out that one of the key points that needed emphasis in working with Hindus was their lack of a solution for sin. He also pointed out that Christian behavior was the main problem getting in the way of Hindus joining the church.<sup>25</sup>

F. H. Loasby, brother of R. E., led out in the discussions on Islam. Loasby stated that he did not have the answers on how best to reach Muslims, but he did know one way “whereby it can *not* be done (emphasis in original).”<sup>26</sup> He proceeded to advise people to avoid any type of argumentative approach, and even described a public debate he participated in that turned out very badly. At the same time he was adamant that it was necessary to “study Islam, its history and progress.” Apparently, according to F. H. Loasby, “there are those who deprecate the idea of studying these religions.” But F. H. Loasby continues by saying, “how any man can possibly be considered competent to work for the Mussulman unless he makes an earnest study of Islam, is to me, frankly, a mystery.”<sup>27</sup> He also spoke out strongly against saying anything negative about Muhammad or the Qur’an in order to avoid unnecessary conflict.<sup>28</sup>

F. A. Wyman was the lead voice in the discussion on Buddhism, but this discussion was less concrete than either the Hindu or Islam discussions had been. For the most part, Buddhists were portrayed as an extremely challenging group with which to work; success among them was lacking, and probably should not even be hoped for. Wyman did attempt to list some similarities between the Christianity and Buddhism but these were largely superficial.<sup>29</sup>

The council had isolated some major issues and challenges. Kern ended the article with these words, “All feelings of racial superiority must be purged from the heart, and we must really love them [adherents of other religions] and treat them as brothers.”<sup>30</sup> At a time when many in the wider Christian church were contemplating whether or not other religions contained “truth,”

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>M. E. Kern, “How to Work for Hindus, Mohammedans, and Buddhists,” *AR* 110.25 (22 June 1933): 9.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

Adventists in India were more interested in figuring out the best way to present the Gospel to these challenging groups.

#### Opening of the Advanced Bible School, 1934

In 1933 the General Conference Annual Council voted to open The Advanced Bible School in order to offer higher education to Adventist Bible teachers around the world.<sup>31</sup> This school was meant to help workers in the field increase their education beyond the bachelor level. It met for six weeks in the summer for a few years on the campus of Pacific Union College (PUC). By 1936 it had been voted to rename the school the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and move it to Takoma Park near the General Conference headquarters.<sup>32</sup> The seminary would continue to grow and increase in enrollment over the next several years.

The opening of this school of higher learning is relevant to this study in a few different ways. First of all, the students who would come to the school in those early years represented nearly every region of the world Adventists had entered at this time. Many missionaries attended the school during their furlough, and many others studied there before going out into their assigned locations around the world. It was a mixing of the world church where ideas and concepts could be discussed and research could take place at a level the Adventist Church had not experienced up to this point.

In the academic bulletin for the first year, 1934, a course entitled “Studies in World Religions” is listed as a two-semester-credit course. It was taught by Benjamin P. Hoffman, then Dean of Theology at PUC. Hoffman had worked for a number of years in Japan before coming to PUC. The course description read:

The origins, developments, and fundamental teachings of the leading world religions will be studied with reading from the “sacred” writings of these religions. “Acquaintance awakens sympathy and sympathy is the spring of effective ministry.” There is no better way to become sympathetically acquainted with a people than to know something of their religious life. Some intelligent understanding of the real nature of the religious forces with which the missionary enterprise must constantly be in contact is also essential to all who bear responsibility for the progress of the cause of foreign missions, and especially in meeting the modern trends represented by recent appraisal commissions and fact-finding bodies, illustrated by “Re-Thinking Missions.” Evidences that God has not left himself without some witness in any age or among any people, and His preparation among all peoples for the final worldwide proclamation of the gospel will be noted.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup>General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (Washington, DC), Minutes of Meetings of the General Conference Committee, 17–24 October 1933, meeting of 24 October 1933, 1123–1125.

<sup>32</sup>Idem, Minutes of Meetings of the Autumn Council, 21–28 October 1936, meeting of 27 October 1936, 167–168. This is the precursor to the current Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

<sup>33</sup>*Bulletin* (Angwin, CA: Advanced Bible School, 1934), 14 (archived at the

The specific mention of the *Re-thinking Missions* book shows that at least some Adventists leaders were aware of the current debates in mission. Across the theological spectrum Adventists leaned heavily toward fundamentalist Christianity of the time period. This class description affirms this, but it also reveals Hoffman's belief that an understanding of other religions would help in fostering a more sympathetic attitude.

After 1935, however, the course on world religions was not offered until it reappeared in the 1938 bulletin. In the 1938 bulletin "non-Christian religions" is also listed in the "Purpose" statement of the fledgling Seminary. "Studies in World Religions" also reappears in the 1938 bulletin with Hoffman as the listed instructor again.<sup>34</sup> Oddly through the school year of 1940–1941 the purpose statement contained a reference to "non-Christian religions," but from 1939–1944 no specific course on world religions was listed.<sup>35</sup> One can only speculate as to why this was the case.<sup>36</sup>

While there were no specific courses from 1939–1944 in world religions, there were a number of "special lecture series" held for the students between 1935–1938 that dealt with world religions. In 1935 Oliver Montgomery presented a ten-part lecture on "Foreign Mission Problems," which in its description in the bulletin included working among "adherents of non-Christian religions."<sup>37</sup> In 1936 there were two special lecture series that dealt with other religions: "Presentation of Christ to Animists and Mohammedans" by J. G. Gjording, then president of the Malayan Union, and "Presentation of Christ to Non-Christians of China" by Frederick Lee, missionary to China.<sup>38</sup> Frederick Lee's lecture was, at least in part, published that same year in *Ministry*. He advocated a more careful approach to other religions that took the context of the other religions seriously.<sup>39</sup> In 1937 and 1938 the final two listed lecture series on world religions took place: "The World of Islam

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Center for Adventist Research [CAR] housed in the James White Library on the campus of Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan).

<sup>34</sup>The course description was shortened, and the lines on *Re-thinking Mission* were omitted. The general thought of the course description is basically the same, however. See *Bulletin* (Takoma Park MD: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1938–1939), 11, 19 (archived at CAR).

<sup>35</sup>To date I have not located any documentation as to why the course was offered and then removed and then offered again and then removed again.

<sup>36</sup>In the bulletin for the 1941–1942 school year the "Purpose" Statement is changed to the heading "Objectives," and there is no longer any reference to "non-Christian religions."

<sup>37</sup>*Bulletin* (Angwin, CA: Advanced Bible School, 1935), 20 (archived at CAR).

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, (1936), 20 (archived at CAR).

<sup>39</sup>Frederick Lee, "Reaching the Non-Christian with Our Message," *Ministry* 9.1 (1936): 14–15. In the article Lee stated several things that are of interest to this study: "We need not bring to the preaching of the gospel the taint of foreign environment" (*ibid.*, 14). And later in the same article in a five-point list he also says, "Make points of contact through that which the native has experienced, and from this point seek to widen his vision" (*ibid.*, 15).

Yesterday and Today” in three parts by Samuel Zwemer, one of the most well-known Protestant missionaries to Islam of the time; and “Hinduism” a six-part series by R. E. Loasby, who was involved in the Southern Asia Division council noted above.<sup>40</sup> The fact that a non-Adventist like Zwemer was invited is significant. At a time when Adventists were not known for their interdenominational cooperation, Zwemer was asked to give lectures on Islam at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. This may be an indication of the level of importance the seminary leadership saw in learning about Islam.<sup>41</sup>

Zwemer’s lectures were later published in *Ministry*, divided up into five articles that ran periodically from the March 1938 issue to the February 1939 issue. Zwemer was clear on the need to understand Islam through thorough research and believed in careful understanding as being essential to reaching out to Muslims. Zwemer had published many articles and books on Islam based on his experiences living in the Middle East for many years. He was also adamant that Islam had little to offer Christianity and that “Islam is dead in Turkey, is dying in Persia, and has ceased to be a great force in India.”<sup>42</sup> Zwemer was opposed to any type of fulfillment theology in relation to Islam and believed that it was not a “preparation” religion for the Gospel. He often wrote that it appeared the time was right for many to leave Islam and join Christianity, a prophecy that went largely unfulfilled during his lifetime.<sup>43</sup>

In the 1942–1943 school year several Arabic language courses were newly listed in the bulletin. The instructor was “an Iraqi brother, Khalil Ibrahim, known to Americans as [K]arl Bremson.”<sup>44</sup> The bulletin does not give an explanation for the sudden appearance of these courses, but a voted action

<sup>40</sup>*Bulletin* (Takoma Park, MD: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1937), 23 (archived at CAR); *ibid.* (1938–1939), 28 (archived at CAR).

<sup>41</sup>Unfortunately I have not been able to locate any details concerning the contents of any of the lectures listed in this paragraph, with the exception of Samuel Zwemer’s, which were later published in *Ministry*.

<sup>42</sup>This is taken from the issue of the *Watchman-Examiner* that was published on 16 September 1937, which was quoted in “The Religious Press,” *Ministry*, 10.11 (1937): 21. Zwemer was a mentor to Hendrik Kraemer, whose book on non-Christian religions, published in 1938, became very influential.

<sup>43</sup>For the lectures that were published in *Ministry*, see “Islam as a World Problem,” *Ministry* 11.3 (1938): 3–4, 41; “Challenge of Daybreak in Islam—No 1” *Ministry* 11.11 (1938): 5–6; “Daybreak in Islam—No. 2,” *Ministry* 11.12 (1938): 17; “The Christology of Islam—No. 1,” *Ministry* 12.1 (1939): 11–12; “Christology in Islam—No. 2,” *Ministry* 12.2 (1939): 17–18, 46.

<sup>44</sup>W. E. Howell, “In Contact with Our Colleges,” *AR* 119.46 (12 November 1942): 19. See also *Bulletin* (Takoma Park, MD: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1943–1944), 8, 24–25 (archived at CAR). Note in the General Conference committee minutes from 9 July 1942, there is record of the vote to bring “K. Bremson (Khalil Ibrahim)” to the Theological Seminary to teach Arabic (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Minutes of Meetings of the General Conference Committee, 2–30 July 1942, meeting of 9 July 1942, 507).

found in the General Conference Committee Minutes of 2–30 July 1942, does give some details. Under the sponsorship of R. E. Loasby, who had joined the faculty of the Seminary in 1938, a new initiative was undertaken to train Adventist missionaries specifically for working in the “Moslem” world. Bremson was hired as a result of this initiative. In connection with this new emphasis five families came to the Seminary and completed a number of Arabic courses before heading into mission work in the Middle East.<sup>45</sup>

In the “Foreword” to the bulletin for the 1943–1944 school year it was mentioned that a voted action was taken to include mission languages in the Seminary, as well as a separate “division” for “Missions and Christian Leadership.” As seen above, the Arabic language courses had already been taught for a year, and now several other languages were added, although all of them were European languages, with the exception of Arabic. The most notable newly offered courses were “Islamic” and “Moslem Lands and Peoples,” both taught by George Keough, a former missionary to Egypt.<sup>46</sup>

During the following school year of 1944–1945 the courses in Islam were again offered. In addition, a new course entitled “Christianity and Non-Christian Religions” taught by Andrew N. Nelson was also offered.<sup>47</sup> This course would continue to be offered throughout the decade, with the only change coming in 1947–1948, when D. E. Rebok took over as the instructor. The courses in Islam lasted until 1947–1948, when they no longer appear in the bulletin.

The increased interest in mission and world religions in the Seminary, especially Islam, during the 1940s was probably twofold. First, the appointment of D. E. Rebok in 1943 as the Seminary president certainly was a factor. Rebok had spent most of his active ministry life, prior to this appointment, involved in the educational work of the Adventist church in China. He came with a wealth of knowledge in missions and was also keenly interested in world religions. The second factor relates to World War II. As a result of the war many missionaries were either forced or chose to leave their mission stations to return to their homelands in Europe or North America. One of these was George Keough, who came to the U.S. from Egypt to teach.<sup>48</sup> The Seminary took advantage of his presence and used him for several years to teach courses in Arabic and Islam.

<sup>45</sup>See *ibid.*, 507.

<sup>46</sup>The course description for “Islamic” was “A short review of the history of the rise of Islam; a study of the teachings of the Quran; the doctrine of the Trinity and the Sonship of Jesus.” The course description for “Moslem Lands and Peoples” was “The geography and history of the Middle East, the customs of its people. Extensive reading required.” See *Bulletin* (Takoma Park, MD: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1943–1944), 28 (archived at CAR). For the obituary of George Keough, see R. M. A. Smart, “Pastor George D. Keough,” *British Advent Messenger* 76.19 (10 September 1971): 7.

<sup>47</sup>*Bulletin* (Takoma Park, MD: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1944–1945), 35–36 (archive at CAR).

<sup>48</sup>Pfeiffer, *European Seventh-day Adventist Mission*, 61.

In summary, it is important to recognize that during certain periods the Seminary was quite intentional about having courses in world religions. While this was never developed at the same level as the other areas of study (i.e. biblical studies, systematic theology, archaeology, and church history), it was important nonetheless. However, there were also periods when world religions were not a part of the curriculum, and in general until the arrival of D. E. Rebok they were relegated to the sidelines of academic study in the Seminary.

In comparison with the wider Christian movement it should be noted that many universities had begun including courses in Comparative Religion by this time. These were often meant to be objective studies of other religions and often viewed missionaries and missions as suspect. However, similar to the fundamentalist movement, Adventists viewed other religions as people groups to be evangelized, and therefore the seminary offered courses on world religions as part of the practical theology discipline, not as a separate comparative religions department.

#### The Middle Eastern “Committee of Three,” 1935

In the 14 November 1935, issue of the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* there is a major article written by W. K. Ising, focused solely on the challenge of Islam. He prefaces the article with the admission that the Arabic Union Mission had done very poorly in engaging with Muslims, who made up the vast majority of the population in their territory. Ising was clear that it could only be through “the mind of God” that a workable method would be forthcoming.

The first step taken was to form a special committee “to draw up a plan for systematic study” of the major challenges posed by Islam. This committee consisted of Ising and two other European missionaries, Erich Bethmann, who was stationed in Transjordan, and Willy Lesovsky, who was stationed in Lebanon-Syria. A “circular letter was sent out” to the workers of the Union, asking for suggestions as to which methods were best.<sup>49</sup>

Heavy emphasis was laid on the necessity of studying Islam. This included the history of Islam, as well as Muslim religious thought. In order to help the readers achieve this goal, two separate headings were given with lists of important books that covered theological and historical topics in Islam and Arabia. Each book was described in brief to help the reader understand the content. At the end of the article there were six more headings with a more extensive bibliography of books that dealt with Islam and Arabian geography and culture. Thirty-six books were listed under the following headings: Arabia Before Mohammad; Mohammed; Expansion of Islam; The Koran; Islam Thought; and Ancient Oriental Churches and Islam. Many of the most recognized Islamic scholars of the day can be found on the list, including Samuel Zwemer, Sir William Muir, a highly respected expert in Islamic

<sup>49</sup>W. K. Ising, “Preparing for Work among Moslems,” *AR* 112.46 (14 November 1935): 12.

history,<sup>50</sup> and F. A. Klein, a well-known writer in the area of comparative religions.<sup>51</sup>

The idea was that various workers throughout the Union would choose topics to study so that all the topics would be covered and studied carefully. They were then to report to Erich Bethmann which topic they were studying so as to avoid “undue overlapping” in topic choice. There were twenty topics to choose from under three headings, Arabia, Mohammad, and the Koran. Additions to the list were also allowed. It was then stipulated that the study should last no more than one year, at which time the “findings” were to be “summarized in a written thesis and sent to the secretary [Bethmann] for duplication and circulation.”<sup>52</sup>

Around the same time it was noted “Elders Bethmann and Lesovsky” had “just completed the special summer course at the Newman School for Missions in Jerusalem. Elder Bethmann did special research work in their large library and advanced study of the Koran. Elder Lesovsky studied Arabic and Islamics.”<sup>53</sup> The Newman School for Missions was primarily under the care of Eric F. F. Bishop and was started as a result of a major conference on the challenge of Islam held in Lucknow, India, in 1911, led by Samuel Zwemer. This was one of the few mission schools of its kind around the world at the time and would have been a unique and formative experience for Bethmann and Lesovsky, and no doubt played a role in their approach to Muslims.<sup>54</sup>

There were several key biblical passages that Ising drew on to motivate the readers in their preparation for working with Muslims. He highlighted the promise God made to Abraham concerning Ishmael as a sign of the potential in the Middle East. He also quoted Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 concerning becoming all things to all people. Isaiah 60:7 was also quoted as a promise that the sons of the East would come to God.<sup>55</sup>

In many ways this was the beginning of a very strong foundation for Adventist work among Muslims. The work with Muslims began to gain momentum at a greater pace than it did with other religions. The work done by these early pioneers was crucial, and in many ways they were not only

<sup>50</sup>Probably Sir William Muir’s most well-known work was *The Caliphate: Its Rise, Decline and Fall* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1892).

<sup>51</sup>Ising, “Work among Muslims,” 12, 13.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>For more on the Newman School of Missions, see Lyle L. Vander Werff, *Christian Mission to Muslims: The Record: Anglican and Reformed Approaches in India and the Near East, 1800–1938* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1977), 231, 342. See also the following website: Adam Matthew Publications, “Church Missionary Society Archive: Section IX: Middle East Missions,” [http://www.ampltd.co.uk/digital\\_guides/cms\\_section\\_IX\\_part\\_1/Publishers-Note.aspx](http://www.ampltd.co.uk/digital_guides/cms_section_IX_part_1/Publishers-Note.aspx). Bishop was not a prolific writer, but he did author one significant work, which attempted to portray the gospels through a Palestinian cultural lens; see Eric F. F. Bishop, *Jesus of Palestine: The Local Backgrounds to the Gospel Documents* (London: Lutterworth, 1955).

<sup>55</sup>Ising, “Work Among Moslems,” 12–13.

leading the Adventist Church but were also moving ahead of the work of the wider Christian movement among Muslims.<sup>56</sup>

### *Conclusion*

While there were certainly many other important events in the development of Adventist approaches to other religions, these are some of the more prominent ones. At a time when the Christian world at large was embroiled in discussions on mission, especially as it related to other religions, Adventists were also engaging in discussion.

The increase in discussion among Adventists was manifested in two major councils, one in India the other in the Middle East. The Biennial council in Poona in 1933 highlighted the recognition that there were major challenges that had not been met in all three of the world's largest religions. The emphasis in the Middle East on a more careful approach to Islam in 1935 onward is also important because, as will be shown in part two, Adventist understandings and approaches to Islam became more developed than the Adventist approaches to either Hindus or Buddhists. The gathering of important leaders in both of these councils signaled to the wider Adventist Church that these were real issues that needed careful thinking and dialogue.

The opening of the Advanced Bible School, with its periodic offering of courses and special lectures in world religions, also reveals that the Adventist Church had interest in this important area, even if it was not the primary focus of the Seminary. Many of the leaders of the Adventist Church from around the world passed through classes at the young Seminary. Therefore, the fact that courses on other religions were periodically offered meant that the ideas these courses expounded potentially traveled around the world.

These three events highlight that other religions had started to appear much more frequently on the Adventist mission radar screen. The challenges people were facing in the mission field did not have easy solutions prompting larger discussions, councils, and even courses in the Seminary. While solutions remained elusive, many new ideas and prospects were formulated out of these events, creating the potential for new approaches to other religions.

The second part of this article will look more carefully at some of the key people who were leading the Adventist discussions on other religions between 1930 and 1950. It will also analyze some broad trends that the research has revealed regarding the overall Adventist approach to other religions during the same period. Together these two aspects will create a more complete picture of Adventist approaches to other religions from 1930 to 1950.

<sup>56</sup>For more on the build-up to this point in the Middle East, see Pfeiffer, *European Seventh-day Adventist Mission*.