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Adventism among the World Religions

The major non-Christian world religions have made only a faint thumb print on the mission and theological agenda of the Seventh-day Adventist Church throughout its nearly 150-year history. But in recent years, that thumb print has inevitably become more distinct as the Adventist Church has grown rapidly in regions where non-Christian religions dominate. Partly by choice, partly by force of circumstances, and partly from the desire to work together in common causes such as religious freedom, Adventists have increasingly been drawn into dialogue with non-Christian believers.

Other Mission Priorities

Writing in 1856, Adventist pioneer James White called for a missionary spirit among church members, “not to send the gospel to the heathen; but to extend the warning throughout the realms of corrupted Christianity.” When the church’s first official overseas missionary, J. N. Andrews, traveled to Switzerland in 1874 he echoed this priority. He saw his task as sharing distinctive Adventist beliefs with other Christians. According to Borge Schantz, Adventists “approved of and praised” mission to non-Christians but saw it as a task for other churches” (Knight 2007:122).

For the first quarter of a century after 1844, Adventists had, in Richard Schwartz’s words, “only a limited concept” of taking the Good News to all the world. Initially the church had seen its mission field as almost exclusively the United States (Schwarz 1979:141). The thought of a mission overseas was daunting for the “little flock” of Adventists, and Arthur Spaulding says this early view of the mission field was a “comforting rationalization” (Spaulding 1961:193). In fact, it was not until the 1890s that the church even sent missionaries to non-Christian lands (see Knight 2007:124-128).

However, it did not take long before Seventh-day Adventist missionaries were crisscrossing the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, establishing

congregations in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Pacific. But again, as they reached the shores of foreign lands, they conducted their work with little regard for reaching out to adherents of non-Christian religions. And as Richard Schwarz suggests, “Initially Adventists had little concept of the difficulties involved in meeting sophisticated non-Christian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam” (Schwarz 1979:357).

Todd Johnson and Charles Tieszen point out that “tribal peoples were the focus of Christian mission in the twentieth century,” (Johnson and Tieszen 2007) and Adventists, too, reached out to these groups and to Christians of other denominations. Even in recent years non-Christian religions have continued as something of a missiological blind spot among Adventists (despite Global Mission and other initiatives), with the church operating in many parts of the world almost as if other religions did not exist—aiming most of its “outreach” efforts to other Christians or animists.

Throughout its history, the Adventist Church’s mission focus has been almost totally constrained within the borders of one world religion—Christianity. A brief survey of any Adventist Book Center reveals that almost all titles are written by Adventists for Adventists (or for other Christians). Almost all assume that their readers have a Christian worldview, including a belief in the Bible. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of membership growth in the Adventist Church has come from other Christians or from animists at the fringes of other major religions.

Soon after the Global Mission initiative to reach “unentered areas” began in 1990, then-director of Global Mission, Mike Ryan, visited a country to conduct a planning session. After working with church leaders on the philosophy of Global Mission, he encouraged them to work together to lay concrete project plans. When the plans came back, Ryan saw that they were aimed at reaching only the minority religious groups in the country, while totally ignoring the dominant religion that made up more than 80 percent of the population.

Jon Dybdahl recalls asking some early Adventist missionaries to India what their evangelistic approach was to Hindus. “They replied,” writes Dybdahl, “We don’t go to Hindus. We search out Christians and give them further light” (Dybdahl 2006:19). This was the attitude even while Christians made up only 4 percent of India’s population at the time.

Early Adventist Views of Non-Christian Religions

A survey of early literature suggests Adventists saw few, if any, redeeming features in other religions. In 1898, D. A. Robinson wrote about “the hard, cold, Christless creed of fate of the Mohammedans” and “its blighting influence upon millions” (Robinson 1898:436). In the same year, G. C. Tenney wrote of the “ponderous and soul-crushing establishments”

of “Hinduism,” “Brahmanism,” and “Mohammedanism” (1898:445). C. P. Edwards called Hindu priests “living incarnations of the character of the evil one” (1900:458) and Carrie Stringer wrote of “the blight of heathenism, Buddhism and Mohammedanism” that made people’s lives “sad and hard” (1927:3). In 1912, J. E. Bowen described Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shintoism as “baneful and false religions” (1912:5) and the *Sabbath School Quarterly* in 1974 said that “Moslem influence on Christianity was as deadly as the sting of a scorpion” (1974:87).

But although evangelism and conversion remained the dominant Adventist discourse about other religions, and although there were no calls for anything like what today is called interfaith dialogue, there were occasional and growing hints of the need for understanding and bridge-building.

In 1946, the Adventist Church set up the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) to promote religious liberty and freedom of worship (*Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* s.v. International Religious Liberty Association). Over time this organization inevitably involved leaders from other religions in discussions and planning. World conferences of the IRLA now feature prominent leaders from non-Christian religions. Today it consistently calls for greater understanding and dialogue between world religions (Adventist News Network 2007).

As early as 1902, American Guy Dail, then recording and corresponding secretary of the German Union, had written of the need for missionaries to “[arrive] at a mutual understanding with our newly acquired neighbor” and added that one of the “first duties” was to “recognize whatever is good in them and in their institutions, and with some nationalities, as the Chinese, and the educated Arabs and Hindus, it will be to our advantage to have an appreciation of their literature and history” (Dail 1902:207, 208). He concluded that the missionary “must study the art of pleasing others, of putting himself out for the sake of being agreeable and affable to them” (1902:208).

The IRLA grew out of an earlier International Religious Liberty Association, established in 1893, which evolved from the National Religious Liberty Association, established in 1889 (*Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*).

A Broadening Perspective in the 1960s

During the 1960s mainline Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church began moving toward discussions with non-Christian religions, and during this time the term “interfaith dialogue” was coined. For the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was a watershed in opening up the church to the possibilities of interfaith dialogue. Around the same period, changes in mainstream Protestant theology

downplayed exclusive truth claims among the churches, and prepared them for dialogue with non-Christian religions. As William Hutchinson writes, at this time “new initiatives in theology were gaining their clearest—and for traditionalists their most alarming—expressions in the context of overseas missions, where questions about Christianity’s relation to other religions could not be avoided or papered over with ambiguities” (Hutchinson 2004:222, 223).

Although the Seventh-day Adventist Church never moved toward formal interfaith dialogue during the 1960s, there were significant moves toward building bridges to and better understanding of non-Christian religions. The General Conference Executive Committee had voted in 1956 to start an orientation program for missionaries that would include studying “indigenous religions and educational systems” (Minutes of the General Conference Executive Committee 1956). This did not happen until ten years later when the Institute of World Mission (IWM) and the Department of World Mission were established at the Theological Seminary at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

Russell Staples, who joined the IWM as an instructor in 1971, recalls that “the need for a more informed interaction with non-Christian world religions was certainly a major issue” leading to these additions to the seminary. He adds, “The establishment of the Institute of World Mission opened the way for more direct and concentrated study regarding relationships with the world religions” (Staples 2009:e-mail to author).

In 1961, five conferences on how to better reach out to Muslims were held in different parts of the world, led by Ralph Watts Sr., a general vice president of the General Conference (Whitehouse 2008). As a result of these conferences, it was voted to establish an Islamic Studies Center, with Robert Darnell as the director. (For various reasons, this never came to fruition.) These conferences were prefigured by a 1935 Ministerial Convention in Jerusalem that organized a working group to “find ways for approaching Islam from a Muslim point of view” (Pfeiffer 1981:86).

Darnell, field secretary in the Middle East Union, was an Adventist pioneer in building bridges to Muslims. He called Muslims “our friends”—a theme echoed by others in the church in the Middle East at this time (see Semaan 1964:6). In 1963, Darnell wrote:

The true spirit of Christ is the spirit of love for our neighbors. We believe that among the Christians the Muslim has no more sincere friend than the Adventist. Adventist-Muslim friendship will be a demonstrated fact when we enlarge the circle of our love and take the Muslim in. Until then we will continue to be an unknown unappreciated minority. (Darnell 1963:10)

In Tehran, Iran, Darnell pioneered a new approach to public meetings. “The lives and sayings of the prophets were treated in typically Muslim style and quotations were made from the Qur’an and Muslim traditions where appropriate,” reported the *Middle East Messenger*. “The lecturer spoke in an atmosphere of respect for Islam, its book and its prophet” (Darnell 1967:7).

In 1967 at Adventist World Headquarters in Takoma Park, Maryland, the Home Study Institute (HSI) announced a new course in comparative religions. It involved a “careful study” of major world religions including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Animism. “A careful study of world religions can provide a sympathetic understanding of other faiths,” said HSI president D. W. Delafield (Holbrook 1967:3).

In 1966 Ernest Steed came to the General Conference to serve as World Temperance director and executive director of the International Commission for the Prevention of Alcoholism and Drug Dependency (ICPA). Through the temperance emphasis, Steed made significant contacts with Islamic leaders in the Middle East. In 1969 he returned from a 9-week overseas trip and reported to the General Conference Executive Committee that there was a revival of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. “The temperance work is the one cause that can find rapport with these people,” he said (Steed 2008).

In Afghanistan Steed met with government leaders, including the Speaker of the House of Representatives, who reportedly called him “Brother Steed,” and said, “We are brothers; you are a Seventh-day Adventist Muslim.” In Ceylon he attended a seminar run by the Adventist Temperance secretary. The chairman, who was president of the Buddhist Federation of Ceylon, said. “I have learned more in the last two days about Seventh-day Adventists than I have ever known before” (General Conference Executive Committee Minutes 1969).

Steed organized the first World Congress of the ICPA in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1972, which “signaled the beginning of a significant collaboration between Seventh-day Adventists and the Muslim community” (Steed 2008).

Steed took time to become conversant with the themes of the Qur’an and the principles of Islam. He visited Egypt on several occasions, met with the Grand Mufti, spoke in mosques, and also was a guest speaker at an all-Islamic Conference. Earnest Steed’s son, Lincoln, recalls that “after his father spoke at one of these meetings, a religious leader in the audience was offended. He angrily rose to speak. He admitted that the material was excellent, but asked why they had to hear it from a Christian. There was an embarrassed silence, and then the organizer of the conference said, ‘I would like to invite Dr. Steed to become a Muslim.’ Pastor Steed paused,

prayed for the right words. He then turned to the organizer and said, 'Thanks for the invitation, but I'm already a Muslim.' The audience broke into applause" (Steed 2009).

Philosophy of Dialogue

Despite its roots in an inter-denominational movement, the Adventist Church has been skeptical, if not suspicious of ecumenical activities. While the church has no officially stated opinion on ecumenism, and although it supports many of its goals, it has steered clear of joining ecumenical organizations and, in the words of the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, believes that "in the total picture the banes tend to outweigh the boons." But, also in the words of the encyclopedia, the Adventist Church believes that "the ecumenical movement has promoted kinder interchurch relations with more dialogue and less diatribe and helped remove unfounded prejudices" (*Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, s.v. ecumenism).

The Adventist Church has moved with even greater caution in the area of the interfaith movement with other world religions. Would an updated version of the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* include the statement: "The Interfaith movement has promoted kinder interfaith relations with other religions, with more dialogue and less diatribe and helped remove unfounded prejudices"? Perhaps it would.

Angel Rodriguez, director of the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference writes that "despite the potential dangers," dialogue with other Christians also has "potential benefits." He adds, "Therefore we should not discourage, formally or informally, approaching other Christians and even non-Christian religions" (2003:8, 9). John Graz, director of the General Conference Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Association, says that "[interfaith dialogues] are indispensable if we are to develop understanding, good will, and peace" (2008:101).

In January of 2007, William Johnsson, retired editor of the *Adventist Review*, was appointed as a part-time special assistant to the General Conference president for Interfaith Relations. He was assigned to help arrange dialogues with "non-Christian entities," help select topics and presenters, and serve as co-chair with a representative from another entity (Minutes of the General Conference Administrative Committee 2007).

Later that year, Johnsson wrote that Adventists should "seek to engage leaders of Islam in conversation." He added: "The reality is that both their religion and ours occupy the same territory, since we are world religions. We should seek to know them better and help them to know what we believe and stand for" (Johnsson 2007:10).

As a sidebar to Johnsson's article in *Adventist World*, General Conference president Jan Paulsen wrote: "What then are the values that should

mark our relationships with those who do not share our faith? Respect, sensitivity, and a desire to move beyond caricatures toward mutual understanding—let this be our goal as we continue to engage in the mission that has been entrusted to us” (2007:8).

Rodriguez adds: “Only the truth is most effective in dealing with others. False stereotypes and the lack of correct information weaken witness. It is precisely the purpose of the conversation to create an environment in which we are willing to listen to each other in a Christian spirit of love and cordiality” (2007:28).

Wesley Ariarajah, professor of Ecumenical Theology at Drew University, suggests three main approaches to interfaith dialogue, where each faith tradition:

1. Learns about each other in a respectful milieu, but also gives an “authentic witness” to its own faith.
2. “Is challenged and transformed by the encounter with others.”
3. Is in a “common pilgrimage towards the truth,” and “shares with the others the way it has come to perceive and respond to that truth” (Ariarajah 2002).

The current approach of the Seventh-day Adventist Church fits most easily the first category, although it is hard to imagine honestly engaging in this type of dialogue without being “challenged and transformed” (category 2), to some degree. The third category, where participants sit around the table as theological equals, with no witnessing agenda, comparing notes—and totally open to change—seems incompatible with the traditional Adventist mission agenda.

Of course any type of interfaith dialogue has its critics—from both the liberal and conservative perspective. Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith*, and popular apologist for atheism, calls interfaith dialogue “a strategy of politeness and denial.” He adds, “If there is common ground to be found through interfaith dialogue, it will only be found by people who are willing to keep their eyes averted from the chasm that divides their faith from all others” (Harris 2006).

Ironically some Adventists share Narris’s skepticism, for similar reasons, seeing dialogue as a compromise, a sell-out, a denial of the church’s distinctive and unique message. But dialogue need not be this. As religious studies professor Paul Mojzes writes, “The Church cannot change into a society for interreligious dialogue enterprise. If the Church holds no distinct, worthwhile message and cause, it need not bother enter into dialogue, because it will have nothing to give in the give-and-take of dialogue” (Mojzes & Swidler).

Mojzes quotes the Czech Marxist philosopher, Milan Machovec, who once wrote that he was not interested in dialoguing with a Christian who

had no desire to convert him, “with one who holds that the Christian truths have only subjective and thus limited validity, a mere personal preference” (Mojes & Swidler). He wanted to dialogue with Christians who believed that their message had universal applicability.

Within the Adventist Church the Trans-European Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church adopted in 2007 an official Statement on Islam, designed to foster good relations between the Adventist Church and Muslims.

Global Mission Study Centers

The Global Mission initiative, voted by the General Conference Executive Committee in 1990, provided a mandate for engaging with people of other religious traditions. Instead of focusing just on the “to every nation” part of Rev 14:7, it also emphasized “every nation, tribe, language, and people.” The emphasis was still on evangelism, but it provided space for establishing study centers to look at ways of building more effective bridges to other religions. Centers for Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism have been established, and all except the Hindu Center have been heavily involved in interfaith dialogue.

Buddhism

According to William Hutchinson, formal religious discussions between Christians and Buddhists did not really start until the 1980s (2004:189). The Adventist Church was not far behind when in 1992 the Far Eastern Division, supported by Global Mission, asked Clifton Maberly to establish a Buddhist Study Center (information in this section is from e-mails sent by Clifton Maberly, February 2009).

At first Maberly was hesitant. “My first thought was that we didn’t know enough about Buddhism to begin authentically,” he says. “Yes, we had Buddhists in Thailand who had become Adventists, even Buddhist monks who were now pastors, but as far as I knew, no one had built bridges between the two disparate worlds,” he adds. “I was sure none of us knew who we were speaking to or what we had to say that was relevant.”

Maberly knew exactly where he wanted to establish the center, near the Mahachulalongkomrajavidyalaya University (MCU), the largest public Buddhist university in Thailand, with more than 10,000 monks enrolled.

Maberly made an appointment to see the head Buddhist monk for Bangkok, the highest ranking member of the Sangha (the society of Buddhist monks) for Bangkok, and also the abbot of the Mahathat Temple. He explained to the monk that he was setting up a study center to explore the similarities and differences between Adventism and Buddhism. And asked for the monk’s blessing and suggestions.

The monk supported the venture, and suggested a place near the university would best allow for getting to know each other properly and allow for good interaction. Maberly found a place at nominal rent, on temple property, 30 meters from the main entrance to one of the most important Buddhist universities in the world. He then met with the chancellor of the university, a leading Buddhist scholar. The scholar was impressed with the project and encouraged university lecturers to assign their students to visit the center and do comparative studies under Maberly's supervision. Maberly asked the chancellor how he would react if one of the graduate monks became a Christian through the process. "He said he trusted that we would never try to stack the cards in our favour when presenting our ideas and beliefs," says Maberly, "and that if a monk became convinced that Christianity had better answers than he already had, he would hope he would convert—it would be the only intellectually honest thing to do."

Maberly set about establishing the center with room to study, debate, and dialogue. He began working on a library and set up a computer lab. Soon 20 to 60 monks were visiting the center—named the *Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture*—each day. He encouraged university groups to use the center as their place of meeting, and various associations of monks began meeting regularly there.

Maberly found that monks were happy to critique materials the center prepared and distributed to church workers to use. He and Siroj Sorajakool had re-written the 27 Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in language designed to "express the meaning of the document in appropriate Thai." He gave it to five Buddhist scholars at the university—the teachers of the monks who came to the center. Within a few days he discovered that none of them had been able to get past the first eight or nine statements. "The statements didn't make any sense to them at all," says Maberly. "They had so many questions for clarification that it seemed futile to go on. By the time I had heard all their questions I also ran out of steam, and put the document aside as a flawed document for them."

"I soon learned that we learned the most if we assumed monks were our colleagues," says Maberly. "When we exchanged notes as fellow-shepherds—fellow pastors—we got a measure of each other. We spent hours talking through the challenge of caring for congregations. I was even asked for tips on preaching—on homiletic skills needed to keep the attention and convict the listeners. I became confident to talk to Buddhist monks anywhere about anything."

It was important to Maberly to engage the monks in the center and implement their suggestions where possible. Soon he had a group of what he calls monk "owners" who felt this was their center.

Maberly also helped facilitate more formal dialogues between Buddhists and Christians. "We assisted people of all levels of experience wanting to be able to talk with a real Buddhist or a real Christian in a safe place," he says. "We set them up, advised them how to go about it, and sometimes debriefed them afterwards. I was astounded that so few could carry on a meaningful dialogue. I had to do more damage control with Buddhists than Christians. The triumphalist arrogance of Christians was hard for Buddhists to bear."

In 2002 Scott Griswold was appointed director of the center. Griswold came with experience as a church pastor and as an Adventist Frontier Missions missionary in Cambodia, working among the Buddhists in that country for six years. Although not denying the importance of dialogue, he has not continued Maberly's more formal attempts to connect with Buddhist leaders but has instead emphasized a spiritual ministry to Buddhists. "Dialogue's intention should be two-fold, focusing on commonality and recognizing differences," Griswold says, and "actually sharing with them in a helpful manner so they can see what we truly teach and its great value for them" (Griswold 2009: e-mail to author).

Islam

On July 1, 1989 the General Conference established the Global Center for Islamic Studies at Newbold College in England, with Borge Schantz as director. It was the first tangible result of the Global Strategy discussions that had begun at the General Conference Annual Council in 1986, and which culminated in Global Mission being voted at the General Conference session in 1990 (*Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, s.v. Global Mission). Schantz promoted a strongly evangelistic approach for the center, and in 1995 reported that during his time as director, the center published "14 different models for Muslim evangelism" (Schantz 1995:28).

The same year Jerald Whitehouse was appointed director, and he renamed the center The Global Center for Adventist Muslim Relations (GCAMR), reflecting his priority on dialogue and building bridges to Muslims within their own socio-religious culture.

Whitehouse says that he accepted the position on the assurance from General Conference leaders that the church would support experiments with new methods, and its success would be judged on numbers of ministries not baptisms. "The focus was to see ministries established whether successful or not so that we could begin to learn how to relate effectively with Muslims" (Whitehouse 2008).

In February 2003, GCAMR participated in a "Building Bridges Conference" sponsored by the Trans-European Division. Since then the center has been involved in many dialogues, including personal meetings with

Muslim leaders, a dialogue with Sharia Muslims in England (2006), the "Yale Common Word Conference" (2008), interfaith conferences in Doha, Qatar (2006, 2007, and 2008) and a dialogue at Mindanao State University in the Philippines (2008).

In Mindanao, Whitehouse and then-Adventist Mission coordinator for the Southern Asia-Pacific Division, Rick McEdward, joined fifteen Seventh-day Adventist leaders and scholars and fifteen leading Muslim scholars for a two-day conference at King Faisal Center for Islamic Studies at Mindanao State University.

An influential Adventist faculty member at the university had approached McEdward and said, "Pastor we need to do something here, they respect us but they don't know us." She made the initial arrangements, and then invited GCAMR to care for the dialogue.

At the conclusion of the dialogue, the Muslim scholars said that according to the Qu'ran, Christian groups are more similar to Muslims than any other group. But, they added, Adventists were the only ones they could relate to. They also said that if any tension ever arose between Muslims and Adventists over any issue, they would be happy to act as mediators to diffuse the problem (McEdward February 9, 2009: e-mail to author).

Judaism

Adventism finds Judaism perhaps the most natural candidate for interfaith dialogue. In the 1930s, the North American Division began publishing *Shabbat Shalom*, which aims to "promote a climate of respect, understanding and sharing between Jewish and Christian communities" and calls itself "The Journal of Jewish-Christian Reconciliation."

The World Jewish Adventist Friendship Center aims at "fostering mutual respect, dialogue, understanding, education, and research" between Jews and Adventists, and is conscious of the "unique opportunity to generate interfaith dialogue at the highest levels." Richard Elofer, appointed director of the center in 2000, has been an ambassador for increasing dialogue between Adventists and Jews. He organized an "Adventist Jewish Friendship Conference" in Jerusalem in February 2006. This six-day conference aimed at "building bridges" between Adventists and Jews, and featured both Adventist and Jewish presenters. Wherever he travels, Elofer tries to set up personal meetings with Jewish leaders. He has also helped foster a network of *Beth B'nei Tzion* congregations (Jewish-Adventist congregations), all of which rank dialogue with Jews as one of their major goals.

Other Formal and Informal Dialogue

As the church has grown in the area of the 10/40 Window, and as migration has brought adherents of non-Christian religions to America and other areas where the Adventist Church is strong, growth in interfaith interaction, whether planned or unplanned, official or unofficial, was inevitable. These can range from the Adventist-Muslim Relations Coordinator of the North American Division speaking at interfaith dialogue dinners to Adventists in suburban Australia to talking to Muslim neighbors over the back fence; from formal visits to the General Conference by non-Christian religious leaders to formal debates between Adventists and Muslims in Indonesia.

Some dialogues occur at the institutional level with cooperation between various Adventist organizations, such as the "Our Father Abraham" Conference held at Andrews University in March 2006. Sponsored by the International Religious Liberty Association, the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, and *Shabbat Shalom*, the conference brought together Muslim, Jewish, and Adventist scholars for a better understanding of each religion.

Other meetings appear to just "fall into place," but without consultation with other areas of the church that are also involved in interfaith dialogue. For example, in November 2008, a consultation entitled "Sabbath in Text, Tradition, and Theology" involving Adventists, and other Christian and Jewish scholars began in Boston. Co-chair Tom Shepherd, an Adventist theologian from Andrews University, says the goal of the conversation is "to foster an open and rewarding dialogue between Jews and Christians on this important religious institution" (Shepherd 2009:10). However, Richard Elofer, William Johnsson, and John Graz were unaware of the consultation until after the event.

A controversial example of unofficial Adventist interfaith dialogue is a project in Manhattan, New York, established and run by Samir Selmanovic, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor and a leading voice in the Emergent Church movement in the United States (information in this section is from e-mails sent by Samir Selmanovic to the author on February 6, 2009). Faith House Manhattan describes itself as "an inter-dependent" community that honors and learns from "the teachings, practices, sufferings, and joys of people from different faiths." "Faith House will seek to bring progressive Jews, Christians, Muslims, and sojourners of no faith to become an interfaith community for the good of the world."

Principle number 9 of the 10 principles that guide the project states: "We do not believe in proselytizing; we believe in personal choice and transformation." Selmanovic explains that "proselytizing is primarily an effort to change one's loyalties to religion (and even using God to do so),"

and that this is “a sort of religious colonialism or personal manipulation.” Instead, what Faith House advocates is transformation. “Conversion and transformation are . . . natural outgrowths of people’s spiritual growth and when these include conversion that is to be celebrated.”

Selmanovic advocates a two-way street in interacting with people of other religious faiths. “If we want them to attend our events, we must attend their events,” he writes. “If we want them to be spiritually open to us, we must be spiritually open to them. If we want them to change, we must be ready to change. If we want them to read our Scriptures with trust and respect, we must read their Scriptures likewise. We are interdependent” (Selmanovic 2009).

Oscar Oscindo, who has been an Adventist pastor for fifteen years, and *Ahi al Kitaab* International have been conducting *mujadalas* (interfaith dialogues) with Muslims in East Africa. These have mostly taken the form of public debates, conducted with respect and friendship.

The Hope Channel recorded a recent event in Mombasa, Kenya for possible later satellite broadcast, and the dialogue was broadcast live for two days on the local Muslim FM Radio station that covers the Coast Province of Kenya up into Tanzania. It resulted in some misunderstandings and tensions in the local community, but Osindo says they were resolved. “Our relations with Muslims have been renewed and enhanced.” says Osindo. “I spent two days after the dialogue meeting with diverse key Muslim leaders in the region. We agreed to diversify our cooperation in other areas such as community development, youth, education, and anti-drug abuse campaign among others” (Osindo 2009: e-mail to author).

Conclusion

Twenty years ago sociologist Robert Wuthnow pointed to a “declining monopoly of specific religious traditions over the enactment of religious convictions” (1988:301). Today in the West, Christian denominationalism is becoming less important, there is a growing suspicion of specific truth claims by any organization, and accepting all religious beliefs as equally legitimate is elevated to a virtue.

The dominant discourse about religion in the democratized world is pluralistic, and it is tolerant. In such an environment the words conversion, proselytizing, and missionary become dirty words—subverting the dominant discourse—while words such as co-existing, mutual respect, and working together fit comfortably.

The historical approach of the Adventist Church to its mission does not fit comfortably with this discourse. While respecting the adherents of other religions and championing religious freedom, Adventism has historically been concerned with discovering God’s truth, and sharing that truth with others.

George Knight says the belief that it has a distinctive end-time message has “dominated Adventism for more than a century.” And its conviction that Jesus will not come until the world has heard the Three Angels’ Messages “has undergirded and pushed forward the Adventist impetus for world mission” and left it with no choice but to evangelize in every nation (Knight 2007:110, 111).

Of course within Adventism there are a growing number of other voices suspicious of this traditional view, and more in harmony with the dominant discourse. Reinder Bruinsma writes, “Clearly, for a growing number of Adventist believers in the West the metanarrative of Adventism as a worldwide, divinely ordained movement, united by one theology and one organizational model, with uniform programs and resources, has outlived its sell-by date” (2005:19).

Loma Linda University Religion professor Siroj Sorajjakool argues that God’s revelation is not limited to the Bible and “God has been revealing himself from the beginning of time in every part of this world.” He adds: “When love incarnates in our lives, we may finally realize that our categorical thinking, the division between superiority and inferiority, true and false, right and wrong, better and worse, which we so desperately seek for religious self-affirmation, no longer exists because love transcends all these categories” (Sorajjakool 2004).

The tension between the traditional, dominant discourse of taking Adventist truth to all the world and those calling for a greater acknowledgment of what God has already been doing in the world may ultimately prove a healthy one for the church and its mission. The danger on the one hand is that we are exclusively preachers of the Word, deaf to the echoes of truth in other religions, unable to contextualize our message, and unmindful of how God has put “eternity in the hearts” of people unacquainted with Jesus or the Bible. The danger on the other hand is that we lose any sense of a distinctive witness or prophetic calling, and see our role as merely helping enhance or supplement the experience of non-Christian believers.

Some within the Adventist Church are also suggesting that its role in dialogue and mission is more effectively conducted from the position of a separate religion, a remnant movement outside the boundaries of Christian denominationalism. They point to distinctive features of Adventism that distance it from Protestantism and Catholicism, and argue that unshackled from Christian denominational baggage, Adventism would be in much better shape to build bridges with other religions.

Despite the attractions in such an approach, the church should not rush too quickly to dismiss completely the soil in which it has grown. Adventist mission is built on the biblical mandate to preach Jesus Christ,

the prophetic voice of Ellen White that helped shape Adventism as a reformist Protestant movement, and a rich heritage of centuries of Christian theology and mission that has stood the test of time. Adventism should distance itself from theological aberrations and heresies in other Christian churches, it must continue to be reformist, and it should be stripped of “caste and country,” but we should step cautiously before stripping it totally of its Christian cloak.

As official interfaith dialogue grows stronger, it is ironic that Christians appear to be totally ignoring their non-Christian neighbors. Research by Todd Johnson and Charles Tieszen suggests that Christians are hopelessly and inexcusably out of touch with non-Christians in their communities (2007). They found, for example that in North America only 35.6 percent of Buddhists, 22.7 percent of Hindus, and 67.8 percent of Muslims say they know even one Christian. They conclude that around the world, 86 percent of Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslim do not personally know even one Christian. In Europe only 31.8 percent of Buddhists, 57.6 percent of Hindus, and 18.5 percent of Muslims say they know at least one Christian.

The time is more than ripe for the Adventist Church and its members to broaden their horizons to engage non-Christian believers in a serious, open, meaningful, and Christ-like way. Since the church was founded in 1863, we have done a lot of talking, preaching, writing, and broadcasting—at people from various religious traditions. But have we also listened and learned? Have we worked to understand? And have we shown genuine care like we should?

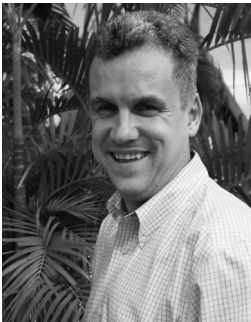
In 2003, Malcolm Bull wrote, “If growth continues at the same rate in the next century. Seventh-day Adventism will become America’s single most important contribution to world religion” (279). Now is the time to rise to that high responsibility.

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