Communicating Adventist Beliefs in the Muslim Context

By Jerald Whitehouse

Any belief system is imbedded in a particular worldview. As we discuss the communication of Adventist beliefs in the Muslim context it may be helpful before we examine the details to take a view of the broad picture—the worldview as it is related to the belief system. In brief, I am using worldview to refer to the fundamental assumptions about reality. It orders our culture and various fields of knowledge from mission, to theology, to science.

Statement of the Issue

The question of how we move “the message” across cultural differences, worldview differences, and socialization differences takes on unique relevance to Seventh-day Adventists. Our eschatology sees a unique role for Adventists in the last days, a worldwide prophetic movement with the mission of preparing a people to meet Jesus. This is the Kingdom of God in people’s hearts in contrast to the common Christian motif of the “reign of Christ” or the earthly establishment of the Kingdom of God through the “Christian kingdom” gaining in superiority over other religions and religious nations.

Since the Adventist objective is a certain quality of faith exhibited in all people groups so that the issues in the Great Controversy over the character and government of God are demonstrated and proclaimed accurately to all people, it is even more imperative that this faith development take place in context. This results in similar parameters of trust in God among peoples of diverse worldviews and ways of thinking and expressing those “faith parameters.” It requires that the faith be uniquely theirs, rather than a foreign import
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<th>Adventist Worldview</th>
<th>Muslim Worldview</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
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<td>God has revealed him-</td>
<td>God the Creator has</td>
<td>We agree on the basic concept of the Creator God sending messages through the prophets for the guidance of his people. We need to move the Muslim to the more personal concept of God revealing himself. While respecting Muhammad as a reformer and the Qur'an as containing some truth we must move the basis of faith to the Scriptures.</td>
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<td>self in creation and created works, in Scripture</td>
<td>sent messages of guidance through his messengers who wrote in the Torah, Zaboor, and Injil. The final revelation was given to Muhammad in the Qur'an.</td>
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<td>through the prophets, in Jesus, and through the Holy Spirit.</td>
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<td>God is “Superintendent” of history, and is working out his eternal purposes in the “Great Controversy” between good and evil.</td>
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<td>God, in his transcendence, does as he wills in history. There is a battle between God and Iblis (Satan), and Satan is seeking to deceive as many as possible, but God provides protection and guidance to the faithful.</td>
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<td>The key concepts are similar including the God—Satan controversy. We can build on this to introduce the “expanded” understandings of the issues in the Great Controversy and how God is working through a demonstration of his character rather than force.</td>
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<td>God is the Creator of all things, his creation of the earth was perfect, but was defiled by the fall of Adam and Eve.</td>
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<td>God is the Creator of all things, a perfect world that was lost in the misbehave, but was defiled by the fall of man.</td>
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<td>God as Creator is the same. The fall of man is similar but the nature and consequence of the fall is not as severe in Islam. Again we build on the similarity to lead to an understanding of the seriousness of sin leading to a state of brokenness.</td>
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<td>God works in solving the sin problem in the universe, refuting the accusations of the evil one, becoming one with us, sacrificing himself in human form, reconciling us to himself, thus ensuring the security of the universe from sin through eternity, securing full loyalty and trust of his creation while respecting the individual freedom to either give or withhold that loyalty.</td>
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<td>God solves the problem of “misguidance” in his universe by (1) forgiving the repentant and subservient believer; and (2) judging between one’s good and bad works on the day of judgment. His judgment is transcendent and final and results in the faithful in paradise and the unbelievers in hell fire.</td>
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<td>This entire proposition contains perhaps the largest degree of difference. The general concept of forgiveness and a day of judgment are similar. However, the way of forgiveness through God reconciling man to himself by incarnating and then sacrificing himself must be gradually taught. God’s respect for the individual’s freedom of choice is news to the Muslim.</td>
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<td>God creates a new heaven and earth at the end of time and the beginning of an eternity of righteousness.</td>
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<td>God will establish a rule of righteousness and cleanse the earth from unbelief, ushering in an eternity of righteousness.</td>
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<td>The general concepts are quite similar. The details of the millennium and the final end of sin vary.</td>
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which often simply overlays the old worldview, values, and beliefs resulting in syncretism. As John Kent, Adventist Frontier Missions missionary, related to me his dilemma after helping to establish a church among an “unreached” remote tribe in New Guinea, he noted: “I realized I had forty Adventists on the outside, and forty animists on the inside.” And so began a journey, a struggle to do Adventist theology in context so that it would become truly theirs, an accurate internalization of the principles of the message in that time and place, resulting in a demonstration of that faith in the lives of those Adventists in all situations.

Therefore, to even get a hearing in the Muslim world, we must not only “package” the message in Muslim friendly terms, but we must also “reframe” the contents of the package so that it speaks truth accurately to the Muslim mind. If the Muslim must adopt a Western frame of thinking in order to understand the message, the message will be rejected from the start.

Prioritizing Beliefs for Faith Development in Context

Present Truth Is Time and Place Specific

Within the Adventist heritage, “present truth” is a familiar phrase. It carried the notion that at a particular time in earth’s history there was a unique focus and emphasis on certain truths from the larger universal body of truth that were of supreme importance. I suggest that for a Muslim at any given time and place there is also “present truth” for that person. To try to force belief by focusing on other points of belief that the presenter may think are most important is to fail in mission. There is a “constellation”
of beliefs that we espouse, but we must focus first on the star that will captivate the heart of the Muslim. Only later will the person be able to appreciate the other stars in the constellation and then the constellation as a whole. If those working with Muslims fail to realize this, they only raise walls and alienate. This requires understanding of what the heart need of the Muslim is, rather than stressing our understanding of his truth need. Nicodemus’ truth need was to discuss Christ’s divinity, his identity as Messiah. His heart need was to understand and experience the new heart that only God could create within. Present truth for Nicodemus at that time was heart conversion, not knowing of Christ’s divinity. Knowing the character and mission of Christ would come later.

The Need Is for a New Heart

This reality requires not only knowledge of and spiritual sensitivity to the Muslim, but also a comprehension of essential truth for spiritual growth at that point in time, versus what is supportive and enhancing of spiritual principles that must take precedence. Jesus summarized the entire duty of man as love to God and love to man (Matt 22:37-40). Paul focuses it even more as one command, love is the fulfilling of the law (Rom 13:10). We are not referring to some naïve love for everyone, not you’re OK I’m OK mentality. There are certain specific principles that must be exemplified in our relations with Muslims and which we must endeavor to instill in them as we challenge them to deeper faith.
Tolerance, Respect, and Affirmation of Spirituality

First, because of the history of intolerance and use of force in the relations between Christians and Muslims, Christians must be champions of tolerance. Respect for the Muslim’s faith is a given. They are not heathen or pagan. They orient their lives around God much more than most Christians. I have listened to sermons in the mosque that, with little or no alteration, could have been delivered from an Adventist pulpit. Too often we reflect the understanding of the disciples when they said, “Master, we saw a man driving out demons in your name, and we told him to stop, because he doesn’t belong to our group” (Luke 9:49 TEV). We must approach the Muslim with an attitude of respect, tolerance, and even further of appreciation and affirmation for the spirituality they exhibit. We must encourage that same respect and affirmation within them. It is present in the Qur’an and can be appealed to in our work with them.

Taqwah (Righteousness)

Beyond respect, tolerance, and affirmation I can summarize the priority issues under the subject of holiness. Holiness is a gift from God as one experiences the new heart from him and renews his commitment of faith. This is not an unbalanced emphasis on perfectionism. Perfectionism emphasizes behavior; holiness focuses on a quality of the inner man, a wholeness for God. The Muslim must be challenged to holiness not through form and ritual, but through the new heart from God. This is done by using biblical principles, but expressed in Muslim language and in terms familiar to them. This requires an understanding and usage of the Qur’an. We build on the Islamic concepts of submission to God, and taqwah, inner righteousness, as a gift from God.

It is important to guide the Muslim to this new heart experience first. We have reached a significant milestone when a Muslim responds and says, “Please pray for me that God will give me that new heart.” Such a heart is a heart of obedience, a heart that is open to God’s voice, a heart that is willing to listen, a heart that asks, What must I do to be saved? The heart that says, How can I be sure of my standing in the day of judgment? Initially this takes priority over doctrinal details. This is foundational to an understanding of all subsequently considered beliefs. Before acceptance of a certain set of abstract beliefs and even before adoption of a new way of religious practice must come this new heart experience. The set of beliefs and practices will follow as a result of this new heart, this gift of holiness. Doctrines will then be facilitators of this deeper faith experience rather than mere ritual.
Sensitivity to Absorptive Capacity

Another priority in our spiritual work with Muslims is sensitivity to their spiritual absorptive capacity, the speed at which the Muslim can incorporate new understanding of spiritual matters. I marvel at Jesus’ patience with his disciples. Even as he was giving them last minute instructions on his way to the place of his ascension, they still didn’t get it. “When will you restore the kingdom to Israel”? they asked. It was only as they were seemingly left to their own resources that the greatest resource was sent to them, the Holy Spirit, which was then able to guide their understanding of the vital truths of Jesus’ divinity and his true mission (White 1940:506, 507). This degree of patience in leading them from a restricted monotheistic position, and away from a political agenda, to a more complete understanding, is directly instructive for us in working with Muslims.

The Divinity of Christ

A particularly instructive example of this prioritizing and gradual sequencing of truth in our work with Muslims is Jesus’ handling of the question of his own divinity. He essentially does not make it a matter for discussion until late in his ministry in his confrontation with the religious leaders in the temple (John 10) and during his trial. After asking his disciples, Whom do you say the Son of Man is? and clarifying that Peter’s answer did not come from human understanding or teaching but directly by inspiration from God, he “ordered His disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Messiah” (Matt 16:20 TEV).

The divinity of Christ is not a subject to force on the Muslim. It is not to become a point of controversy or a stumbling block.

I have never heard this text referred to as instructive for classes in personal or public evangelism, but I think it bears tremendous import for us in working with Muslims. This command and others like it were given to his disciples who would first work in Jewish areas or to those healed in Jewish territory. When in Samaria, where the issue of the divinity of Christ was not inflammatory as it was in Jewish areas, he openly spoke of his Messiahship, “I am He” (John 4:26).
The divinity of Christ is not a subject to force on the Muslim. It is not to become a point of controversy or a stumbling block. It is our job to *pile up the evidence* for his divinity without directly referring to it, and then the Holy Spirit will bring that evidence to bear on the mind of the seeker in due time and lead them to that “aha” experience, “He must be . . . He is my Lord.” Christ’s example informs us on this matter as well as Paul’s assertion in 1 Cor 12:3, “No one can confess ‘Jesus is Lord,’ unless he is guided by the Holy Spirit” (TEV). This experience has been repeated over and over again in our work with Muslims. Several weeks after a series of studies was conducted on the *Hanif*, one of the Muslim persons who was baptized communicated: “I was shocked when it dawned upon me what you were trying to tell us regarding Jesus. Now I truly believe. He is God.”

By the way, when Muslims come to this realization they see in Jesus, God, not Son of God, because of the background of revulsion at the least implication that God had a physical son. Brennan Manning summarizes it well in the following statement:

The possibility of anyone’s recognizing in the fragile humanity of Jesus the plentitude of God’s power to save comes only from a miraculous intervention of God. ‘Radical faith is not an achievement, for if it were we would will it and be done. Rather, it is a gift, and we are left to react respectively, to watch and to pray’ (1992:24).

We present the evidence in a way that the Muslim can understand, and the Holy Spirit works to bring the conviction.² We have found this is the way that we can effectively lead the Muslim with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, to the full belief in his divinity. Also, we have Christ’s example as noted above. The follower of Adventist beliefs from a Muslim background will always use monotheistic terms to describe the Godhead, in contrast to the Adventist from a Trinitarian background who will use terms that will make the Muslim background believer think he is a polytheist.

**Examples of Faith Development in Context**

As we proceed in this task of moving the gospel into the Muslim context, the practical question arises: How much local theologizing do we allow? Are we in danger of developing a diversity of theologies that will result in a theological pluralism, a relativization of Adventism? Will we lose the essential unity of the movement?

**Importance of Local Theologizing**

As we move into diverse cultures and specifically Islamic cultures, how do we chart our course? For the most part, I think we agree that there must be some adaptation to local situ-
Redemptive analogies are cultural phenomena which have been preserved by divine purpose and which can be used to illustrate and make clear certain biblical truths.
which has been lost because of sin. The parallel to \textit{baptizo} is helpful in our discussion of baptism.

\textbf{Redemptive Windows}

But in addition to these redemptive analogies we have gone a step further and utilized what we are calling a \textit{redemptive window}. The redemptive analogy assists in explaining certain ideas or concepts in the biblical belief system. A redemptive window, however, is much more. It is a window into the very heart of the culture which, when the gospel shines through that window, has a powerful impact at the very heart of the Muslim. It impacts the key spiritual motivators in a culture and belief system. The concept of the \textit{Hanif} seems to provide just such a window. It has been lost by many Muslims because it has seemed unattainable. To be totally submitted and loyal to God, to follow completely the faith of Abraham, has been beyond reach. So the devil has played havoc in the Muslim world with folk beliefs, spiritism, fear of evil forces, seeking for \textit{barakah} or blessing from power objects, places, or people to protect from these forces. But the concept of being God’s \textit{Hanif} is present in the Qur’an, in history, both pre-Islamic and at the time of Muhammad. The following description by an Islamic scholar seems to fit the Adventist understanding of true believers hiding in the wilderness to preserve biblical faith.

They [Arab Christians] took their Christianity farther east to Persia and India, to Egypt and Abyssinia, north into the Caucasus and wherever around the Mediterranean their ancestors had planted colonies for trade or settlement. As we have seen, the ascendency of the Church of Rome backed by the Byzantine Empire had alienated these semitically oriented Christians. When they were hereticated by the Church of Rome, and persecuted by the Byzantine Empire or its puppets on the scene, they took refuge in the desert. . . . Both Jews and Christian immigrants to the desert found a ready welcome among those Arabs who upheld the Mesopotamian-Abrahamic tradition. Together they consolidated that tradition in Peninsular Arabia which came to be known as \textit{Hanifiyah}. Its adherents, the \textit{hanifs}, resisted every association of other gods with God, refused to participate in pagan rituals, and maintained a life of ethical purity above reproach. It is common knowledge that the \textit{hanif} was a strict monotheist who paid no tribute to tribal religion, that he was of impeccable ethical character, and that he kept aloof from the cynicism and moral lasciviousness of other Arabs. The \textit{hanifs} always stood above tribal disputes and hostilities. Everybody knew of their presence since they belonged to nearly all tribes (al Faruqi and al Faruqi 1986:61).

Ellen White applies this understanding to Rev 12 and specifically identifies the Waldenses in Europe, Armenians in Central Asia, and believers in Central Africa (White 1950:63, 64). It seems fitting to also include those faithful monotheists in the Arabian desert known as \textit{Hanif}. Therefore, we are using this win-
dow, appealing to the spiritual conscience of the Muslim but providing the means, the Way, the Power to be truly Hanif.

Coupled closely with the concept of the Hanif is the theme of taqwah (inner righteousness). Since this is a prominent theme in the Qur’an, we begin with a discussion of righteousness from the Qur’an, then move to a deeper biblical understanding of righteousness by faith in God’s grace and his sacrifice of himself in Jesus for reconciliation, forgiveness of sin, removal of our shame, and the granting of eternal life.

What we are involved in is a process of re-forming Adventist and biblical theology in context rather than simply exporting a given set of formulations and applying them unchanged to the Muslim world. This process is making theology relevant in the Muslim context and bringing it home to the heart of the Muslim. It is important that we grasp this concept as we evaluate what is happening in the Adventist mission to Islam. We must also remember that we are involved in an ongoing process in which there is continual growth and refinement.

Describing the Atonement in the Muslim Context

One of the most difficult areas for the Muslim is the atonement. How do you explain why Jesus had to die? What is this “payment of a price?” To whom is it paid? Is not God the supreme judge and will he not simply decide whom he will save and who will go to the fire?

Key Cultural Dynamics

As a result of sin all cultural worldviews have developed around three dynamics: First, the dynamic of guilt versus innocence which is common to Western and many cultures where Christianity predominates. Second, the dynamic of shame versus honor which is common to Eastern and group cultures including cultures where Islam and other Eastern religions predominate. Third, the dynamic of fear versus power which is common among animistic peoples. It is possible to find elements of all three in any one culture; however, most cultures will exhibit predominantly one of the three.

By way of illustration, in the West, in the spiritual realm, guilt plays an important role. If a person experiences fear and anxiety, it is often from a sense of guilt or its close ally, inadequacy or not measuring up. Guilt revolves around the breaking of law or not achieving a standard, either human or divine. Western people then use this concept as the basis for explaining a sinful nature, that people are inherently sinful and guilty. In summary then, in the West we are guilt and performance oriented. Our theological statements reflect this (see belief statement number seven concerning the nature of man...
Islam shares two dynamics, shame and fear, with shame being predominant. Under the “definition of sin” and “sin and guilt” (Ministerial Association 1988:89).

**Shame and Fear**

Because of the wide prominence of folk Islam which includes many animistic elements, Islam shares two dynamics, shame and fear, with shame being predominant. These constitute the two most powerful spiritual motivators: shame—the ultimate motivator of knowing one will stand alone, ashamed, and naked before Allah in the day of judgment; and fear—of evil forces which drives one to seek baraka (blessing) in various ways to gain power to protect from evil forces and assuage the fear. It is these two spiritual motivators in the Muslim’s life that influence our presentation of the subject of how God deals with sin.

Of the two, the most pervasive and powerful dynamic is shame. In contrast to the guilt and performance orientation of the West, which is very individualistic, Islam is shame and being oriented, which is being in a state of defilement or shame in relation to the group. An additional contrast of the two indicates guilt as being a feeling or a condition occurring when one has broken or not kept a divine or human law. Shame, by comparison, is a feeling or condition stemming from a shortcoming in one’s state of being, either before God or peers. Shame, similar to guilt, can result in a subjective feeling or condition, but also an objective condition of brokenness, alienation, and even death. It would seem possible, therefore, to use the concept of shame similarly as we have traditionally used the concept of guilt.

It is interesting to note that the concept of shame is much more prevalent in Scripture than is guilt. The English translation “shame” appears in ninety-nine verses in the Old and New Testaments while “guilt” appears twice, and “guilty” twenty-six times. Many of these verses containing the word “shame” use it in reference to the result of sin or wrong acts. There are several Hebrew words for shame (some translated reproach, disgrace, or dishonor). One of these, bosheth, is described in Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible as “shame (the feeling and the condition, as well as its cause).” Ezek 16:51, 52 provides an example of the usage of “shame” as the consequence of sin:
Samaria did not sin half as much as you have. You have acted more disgustingly than she ever did. Your corruption makes your sisters look innocent by comparison. And now you will have to endure your disgrace [shame]. Your sins are so much worse than those of your sisters that they look innocent beside you. Now blush and bear your shame, because you make your sisters look pure (TEV; see also Ezek 34:29; 44:13; Hos 4:7; Obad 1:10; Rev 3:18).

The cities of refuge were instituted to prevent the indiscriminate revenge killing that took place when one’s family was shamed. Even then, if the person who had killed someone accidentally wandered out of the city of refuge, he could be killed by any member of the dead man’s family who found him and “this act of revenge is not murder” (Num 35:27 TEV).

The virginity of a bride was crucial to the honor of her family (and her new husband). It was critical that they (the girl’s family) keep the evidence of her virginity (blood on the bed sheet from the wedding night) or she would be liable to be stoned for bringing shame on a family of Israel (Deut 22:13-21).

Use Simple, Descriptive Terms

Thus, in our translation of the understanding of the atonement effected by Jesus’ life, death, and continued ministry as our high priest, we have used the shame-honor paradigm instead of the traditional guilt-innocence framework. Also, in our discussion of this belief, we have avoided the use of vague or complicated words that require considerable explanation in English, let alone trying to translate them simply and accurately into the Muslim mindset (examples of these would include: propitiation, expiation or expiatory, atonement—in its common usage of “to atone for,” sanctification, justification). In working from the English we prefer to use simple, easily understood terms such as: to reconcile, to bring together (at-one-ment), to set right (with God), to cover (sin or shame), and to receive the new heart (from God).

Muslim View on the Nature of Man

Foundational to the consideration of the doctrine of salvation is the doctrine of the nature of...
man. The Muslim position is in contrast to the Adventist and biblical position on this point. These concepts are covered in beliefs seven through nine in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* (Ministerial Association 1988, chapters 7-9). Kateregga summarizes the contrasting Muslim position well:

Islam does not identify with the Christian conviction that man needs to be redeemed. The Christian belief in the redemptive sacrificial death of Christ does not fit the Islamic view that man has always been fundamentally good, and that God loves and forgives those who obey his will. . . . Islam is the way of peace. The Muslim view, which is in total contrast to the Christian experience, is that man experiences peace through total submission to God’s guidance and mercy. Jesus Christ (PBUH), like many prophets before him, and Muhammad (PBUH), the Seal of Prophets, were both examples of God’s mercy to humanity (Kateregga and Shenk, 1997:175).

*Begin With an Accurate Diagnosis of the Problem*

Obviously, the remedy can only be understood to make sense if the disease is properly diagnosed. If sin is, in fact, only a mistake to be forgiven by a merciful God with no inherent consequences, to speak of the need for a sacrifice to redeem man is like prescribing surgery for the common cold. The advice to go home, drink lots of water, rest, eat more fruit and fewer sweets, i.e., “live right” is sufficient. If, however, sin is a deadly cancer, then major surgery is required. The Muslim would generally agree with the sentence in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, “The antidote for guilt is forgiveness (Matt 6:12) which results in a clear conscience and peace of mind” (Ministerial Association 1988:89). But the Muslim would then be puzzled by the need for payment of a price, the need for a substitutionary death, and satisfaction of justice. To the Muslim these seem to be unnecessary additions. How do we move through these objections?

Even though Kateregga has clarified the “official” view of Islam, it is of interest to note that the Qur’an, in fact, does describe the nature of man, or the result of sin in man, in terms close to the biblical view of a sinful nature.

Of the people there are some who say: “We believe in God and the Last Day;” but they do not (really) believe. Fain would they deceive God and those who believe, but they only deceive themselves, and realize (it) not! In their hearts is a disease; and God has increased their disease: and grievous is the penalty they (incur), because they are false (to themselves) (Surah 2:8-10).

Nor do I absolve my own self (of blame): the (human) soul is certainly prone to evil, unless my Lord do bestow His mercy: but surely my Lord is oft-forgiving, most merciful (Surah 12:53).
Sin Results in a Broken Condition and Alienation From God

We use these texts to move the Muslim’s consideration of sin to a more serious level. Sin is a serious disease that requires serious treatment. God has given help through *fitra*, the nature that God has placed in man to worship him (Surat Al Rum, 30:30), *ilm* (knowledge), and guidance. However, *Iblis* (Satan) has vowed to bring under his control “all but a few.” There is only one way that we can avoid being under his control, if we allow God to create a new heart within us (here we use the biblical references in Ezek 11:19, 20; 36:26, 27; Jer 31:33, 34).

Comparing Guilt and Shame

There is an additional consequence of sin in the Muslim setting—shame or dishonor. Just as in the Western explanation of the biblical teaching that sin, rebellious actions, or thoughts result in a state of guilt that leads to the consequence of death, it is equally strong in the shame and honor culture of Islam that sin results in a condition of shame, both objective and subjective, which can only be remedied by death or removal of the shame object. In the shame and honor culture, serious shame or dishonor on the family requires death of the person bringing the shame. The family cannot survive or maintain its position of honor in the community unless honor is restored by removing the shame person. The fact that shame and honor cultures are group cultures provides the context for this reality.

Abraham’s Example

When people consider the story of Abraham sacrificing his son from within the shame and honor context, it takes on new meaning. It was common for a father to kill his own son if he (the son) had shamed the family sufficiently; however, in this case the son had not shamed the family. Rather he “submitted” himself to his father. In that case, if Abraham had proceeded with the sacrifice of his son, it would have brought shame on him for sacrificing an honorable son. But “when they had both submitted their wills (to God)” (Surah 37:103), a way out was provided. The honor of both was preserved through the provision by God of a lamb to
sacrifice in the place of the son (Surah 37:107). This lamb points forward to what God would do for man. It symbolizes the way out of our condition of shame which is deserving of death.

Therefore, critical to this discussion is the description of what God would do for man’s shame. In the Qur’an, associated with the concept of God providing the first sacrifice to fashion clothes for Adam and Eve to “cover their shame,” is the provision of the best covering, the “covering of taqwah,” or righteousness. “O ye children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you. But the raiment of righteousness, that is the best” (Surah 7:26). This is consistent with Rom 3:25 where the word “propitiation” (KJV) is the translation of the Greek word for the mercy seat (hilasterion). In Hebrew the word for mercy seat (kapparoth from kapher) means “to cover.” We could then justifiably translate the verse, “God offered him (Christ) so that by his sacrificial death he should become the means by which people’s sins are covered through their faith in him” (adapting the TEV translation and emphasis mine).

God’s Way of Restoring Honor As Depicted in the Story of the Prodigal Son

With these components we then have the elements to begin impressing on the heart of the Muslim God’s way of solving the problem of sin and God’s way of restoring honor to those who have so dishonored his name. God has not disowned us. God has not abandoned us, nor has he killed us. God’s way of “restoring honor” in his universe that has been “shamed” by sin and rebellion is not man’s way of seeking revenge. The story of the lost son in Luke 15 epitomizes the way God handles rebellion. The son is never disowned by the father, which is the expected response in Middle Eastern society to such shame, but rather he is continually grieved over and prayed for as “my son.” This father would do no less than David weeping over his rebellious son Absalom: “O my son! My son Absalom! Absalom, my son! If only I had died in your place, my son! Absalom my son!” (2 Sam 18:33). Notice also God’s grieving over having to let Israel go (Hos 11:8, 9).

Now, back to the story in Luke 15. When other villagers threaten to do away with “that boy” so as to preserve the honor not only of the family but of the village, the father orders them to not touch “my son.” The father suffers the shame alone. He is now isolated and misunderstood by the village and seen as a weak and impotent head of his house. When the son is seen in the distance, this elderly father does not worry about the shameful scene of him running to meet the filthy, rag-draped remnant of humanity. Rather, he meets him more than halfway, covers him with the sym-
bol of goodness, “the best robe,” restores him by placing the ring of his own authority on the finger of the boy, and commands a celebration (see Bailey 1976 and 1989). The only cure for the human cycle of revenge in the shame and honor society 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. The role that God has assigned to his people in these last days is that of proclaiming his way of restoring honor in face of the ultimate insults from the evil one.

By his sacrificial death we are now put right with God; how much more, then will we be saved by him from God’s anger! We were God’s enemies, but he made us his friends through the death of his Son. Now that we are God’s friends, how much more will we be saved by Christ’s life! (TEV).

This is consistent with the notion that by sacrificing himself (in Christ) he absorbs the shame, covers us with his own righteousness, thus restoring us to honor (setting us right). This is the reconciliation that Christ’s sacrificial death accomplishes. The broken condition of man (condition of deep shame) which has alienated man from God is removed and the relationship restored. (Note the use of shame in the message to Laodicea in Rev 3:18.) In the shame/honor paradigm the focus is on the restoration of the person’s shameful condition to a state of honor, full reconciliation, and reinstatement in the family. At the same time God’s honor before the universe is vindicated in the face of the accusations of the evil one that he is “arbitrary, unforgiving and severe” (White 1890).

If this great work of reconcili-

In the shame/honor paradigm the focus is on the restoration of the person’s shameful condition to a state of honor, full reconciliation, and reinstatement in the family.

It is of interest to note that the older brother in the story was still operating on the shame, honor, and revenge paradigm. He had long before disowned his brother. He would in no way associate with or acknowledge such a shame and dishonor on the family. He was so concerned about preserving his own honor with justice and revenge that he missed the party.

Paul’s Summary
Paul summarizes the saving acts of God in Rom 5:9, 10:

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ation was accomplished through Christ’s death, how much more will he be able, through his life, to continue to keep us, empower us, and grant us eternal life!

Summary

This paper has addressed several important issues regarding the communication of the biblical message in the Muslim context.

1. The need to re-frame principles of belief for the Muslim setting.

2. The importance of prioritizing what is important (“present truth”) for a person at a particular time and place, according to the spiritual heart need of the person. With this priority, personal piety and spirituality are the focus.

3. The need to respect the absorptive capacity of the Muslim.

4. The indirect approach to the understanding of the divinity of Christ through accumulating evidence and letting the Holy Spirit impress this truth on the heart.

5. The utilizing of elements of truth within Islam as foundational stones upon which to build more complete truth as we reform Adventist beliefs in context. In doing so we use “redemptive windows” into the spiritual heart of the Muslim.

6. Use of the shame-honor paradigm to describe the atonement in terms that more accurately convey the truth of the gospel than the Western guilt/innocence framework.

7. Use of the concept of shame to communicate more effectively the seriousness of sin and our broken condition with its consequences of death.

This approach has resulted in believers in Jesus as Lord and Savior and in the Adventist message who (1) experience a close relationship with God, (2) consider the Bible their primary source of faith and apply basic exegetical principles in their study of the Scriptures, (3) have a clear sense of their “remnant identity” in the Muslim community, and (4) trust in Jesus for salvation, forgiveness of sin, eternal life, and acknowledge his divinity.3

Notes

1 I was led into this line of thought early in my ministry during the few weeks prior to leaving Libya, in which I and my associate were the last Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) workers in the country in 1970. Over several weeks I knew it was only a matter of time until immigration would insist I leave. With my leaving, the official SDA presence in Libya would end. What had thirteen years of SDA presence accomplished? Only one baptism performed in secret in Italy (we had agreed not to proselyte as a condition of our entry into the country). Yet we had impacted numerous lives and not the least of which were the Libyan workers in the hospital, some of whom had been with us for nearly the entire time of the hospital’s existence. As I evalu-
ated the situation, knowing I had only a few weeks left, I realized that almost all of the Libyan workers in the hospital, with a few exceptions, had never had a personal visit in their home by a SDA worker. The spiritual contact had ended with knowing that we had devotional time in the morning and on Saturdays (no Libyans dared attend these very Christian services) and occasional arguments over certain points of disagreement between certain zealous SDA workers and the Libyan staff. I realized that doctrinal knowledge was not the most important thing to focus on in this context. More important was a certain quality of trust and faith in God and a certain openness to spiritual things. I set a goal to visit every home of a Libyan worker. I was touched by the reception I received. I prayed with them that their faith in Allah would be strong and that they would remain submitted to Allah in their lives and be ready for the Day of Judgment and the coming of Isa el Masih. I talked with them about the falling away from faith that would increase as time went on, but that God would have a faithful few who would continue in their devotion to him. I shared with them certain key events that would happen to force people’s religious practice in the end time (such as Sunday observance) and that they should be aware that this was a plan of the evil one to deceive as many as possible. I shared with them that we believed the Sabbath would become a sign of those faithful to Allah. We discussed what it meant to be an “Adventist,” one who anticipates the coming of the Messiah. It was no time to launch into a presentation on issues that would only generate argument or points too hard for them to accept. I think I felt somewhat like Jesus must have felt those last few hours with his disciples, “There are many things I would like to tell you but you cannot bear them.” It was a time for a spiritual appeal within their realm of understanding to be ready to face their Creator in the day of judgment, to appeal to them that we may never meet again on this earth but we could, if faithful, meet in paradise, to leave them a few pointers which they would remember as final day events began to unfold, and then to commit them into the hands of the Almighty. This whole experience has shaped my subsequent ministry to Muslims. We have simply wasted too many opportunities and too much time by concentrating on doctrinal differences instead of focusing on the heart readiness to meet their Lord. We must put first things first and place as priority certain eternal heart spirituality issues before we consider the more difficult doctrinal points.

2 The growth steps in understanding Christ’s divinity are summarized as follows: (1) Isa (Jesus) is referred to as a prophet; (2) Isa is the prophet with special power over evil forces; (3) Isa is the “healing
prophet;" (4) because of this power that Allah has mediated through Isa, he is the channel of special barakah (blessing) from Allah; (5) in healings of disease that were a direct result of sinful lifestyle (or believed to be), Isa exhibited the power to forgive those sins as well; (6) Isa is the one designated by Allah to stand with us (mediator) on the Day of Judgment; (7) Isa mediates the forgiveness, acceptance, and empowerment of Allah into our lives; (8) Allah provides, through the will of Isa, his very presence in the hearts of the believers; (9) Isa is the great sacrifice that Allah provides to cover our sin and to restore Allah’s honor and the honor of the family of believers from the shame of sin; (10) Allah “cleared him [Isa] of the faults of others,” he had no sin of his own; (11) Isa, as the great sacrifice, gave his life, no one took it from him; (12) Isa was the victor over death; (13) “God [Allah] made manifest in Christ.” “Angels could not fully portray the character of God, but Christ, who was a living impersonation of God, could not fail to accomplish the work.” (White, 1890); (14) “My Lord and My God.”

The following is a summary description from Lepke’s doctoral dissertation on a ministry that is a prime example of “faith development in context” (2001:307, 308). For security reasons it is referred to as the “R-movement.” “From all the descriptions above, the R-movement definitely changed the belief system of its members in many ways that contrasts starkly from what a ‘traditional’ Muslim believes. There are four areas especially that deserve mention.

1. Relationship to God. “Traditional Muslims (with the most notable exception of the Sufi sect) do not live in a father-child relationship with God. Their faith demands a master-slave relationship by which the master, God, is so aloof and distant that there is no sense of closeness and love in it (see Geisler & Saleeb, 1993:27). R-movement believers are different. They have expressed that they are the recipients of God’s love, and that they experience a closeness to God, especially when reading the Bible.

2. Authority of the Bible. “Considering that nearly all Muslims are trained to believe that the Christian Bible is a totally corrupted version of the original, it is one of the greatest achievements of the R-movement to instill the strong belief that the Bible is not corrupted and that to understand all truth a believer has to study the Bible and believe everything it says. As could be seen above, this is not something imposed on the believers, but reflects their own desire, as they especially love the gospels. To enhance this attitude, there is a definite move away from the reliance on traditional interpretation toward a study method that puts one’s own struggle to understand (ijtihad) guided by
the Holy Spirit at the center of interpretation.

3. Remnant identity. “A significant part of the self-understanding of the R-movement members is that they are part of a remnant that follows all of God’s truth, especially that which had been forgotten by other Muslims, i.e., the truths that are taught in the Bible. This reflects, of course, the identity of SDAs who see themselves as part of the remnant who in the last days restore and proclaim the forgotten truths of the Bible (Sabbath, condition of the dead, etc.).

4. The salvific identity and acts of Jesus Christ. “All of the above would be of little value if the believers had not gained an understanding of Jesus Christ that reflects the Christian understanding of his identity and his ministry. The believers in the R-movement have clearly transcended the typical Muslim notion about Jesus as just being a prophet like others. He is the one with supreme power who can protect them from evil forces and also the Mediator in the judgment. The believers have gained an understanding of the severity of sin, and that only through the cross as a sign of God’s mercy can they experience the forgiveness of these. Ultimately they have understood that Jesus Christ is more than a human being, but has a divine nature as the spiritual (as opposed to physical) son of God.”

Works Cited