Introduction

Islam constitutes 22.9 percent of the world’s population with 1.6 billion people considering themselves Muslim. Christians on the other hand, number 2.23 billion or 32.3 percent of the world’s population (Mandryk 2010:2). Islam is the fastest growing world religion (Ankerberg and Weldon 2001:15) and is “the second-largest religion in Europe and the third-largest in the U.S.” (2001:15). In fact, its growth rate is faster than that of the world’s population. It grows at a rate of 1.9% while Christianity is growing at a 1.3% rate (Mandryk 2010:2). The Muslim world, along with Hindus and the culture of the modern cities, are “three great areas of our world which the churches have not really penetrated” (Schaller 1993:11).

Three Reasons Why People Avoid Muslim Ministry

From my own experience in promoting Muslim outreach in the Philippines, it may be concluded that churches avoid reaching out to Muslims for three main reasons.

1. Fear of persecution: It is quite common for Muslim converts to be persecuted by their families and communities. It is estimated that 95 percent of “the few Muslims who do come to Christ tell stories of ill-treatment by their families within days of revealing their decision to ‘become a Christian’” (Accad 1997:8). However, the Lord “challenges us to be liberated from the fear that binds us to inaction” (Parshall 2000b:308).

2. Discouragement: There is a lot of discouragement over the scarcity of fruit in Muslim ministries. Often times, it is the case that those serving in Muslim contexts work five to ten years without seeing a single Muslim convert (Parshall 2000b:307). A Muslim ministry does not fit in well in a paradigm that stresses quick baptisms.
There is also a huge lack of understanding of the Muslim religion and culture. Too many Adventists tend to stereotype Muslims “based on news clips” (Whitehouse 2005a:11). As a result, Christians have an inaccurate perception of what a Muslim is. In the Philippines, a Muslim graduate student complained that whenever there is a bombing, Muslims are the automatic suspects. “They think we are all drug smugglers, gunrunners and separatists” (Ciria-Cruz 2000). Such misunderstandings instill fear and prejudice.

Even in predominantly Christian countries where there is religious freedom and where Christians meet Muslims on a daily basis, the majority of Muslims are still untouched by the gospel. It was estimated that “80% of all Muslims have never heard the gospel” yet only “1% of the world missionary force is working among them” (Sharing Christ with Muslims). While Muslim fundamentalism and extremism should temper Christian missionary endeavors with caution, it must not stop God’s people from obeying their mandate. While “due to the nature of Islamic belief and Muslim temperament, it behooves the Christian to exercise extreme caution in witness,” we must not allow “guarantees of safety... to predominate over our desire to preach Christ and teach the Scriptures” (Parshall 2000a:75). As followers of Jesus who are commissioned to make disciples of all the nations (Matt 28:19), and realizing that all nations means “every people, language and tongues” (Rev 14:6), we are obligated to reach out to Muslim people groups as well. As Wilson points out, “No people is excluded from the universal purpose of God... neither Jew nor Greek nor Muslim” (Wilson 1993:7).

A Fourth Reason Why People Avoid Muslim Ministry

However, there is a fourth reason that prevents Adventist churches from embracing Muslim ministries—the lack of unity among Muslim ministry practitioners. This is a problem, not just in the Adventist Church, but in the global Christian community as well. In fact, it is from the evangelicals that Adventists inherited, not just the various “innovative” approaches, but also the current missiological debate over the C4 and C5 approaches (Johnson 2011:50). C5 ministries are called by Adventist Muslim ministry practitioners a Faith Development in Context (FDIC) approach.

The great divide, as Johnson (2011:50) points out, is often simplistically seen as merely between those who want “more contextualization” and those who want “less contextualization.” Upon closer inspection, however, one sees that the unresolved issues do not just involve methodology. In fact, the objections and counter-objections have to do with the theological/missiological framework behind the praxis being implemented. This paper intends to discuss the issues that hinder unity in Muslim ministries.
Importance of Resolving Issues in Muslim Ministry

When one engages in Muslim evangelism, there are a number of issues that need to be resolved, foremost of which, in my opinion, are the seven being outlined below. Let me underscore at this point, however, that too often, when dealing with innovative ministries, local conference administrative practice seems to be governed not by biblical, theological, or missiological concerns but rather by economics and territorial jurisdiction. This paper suggests that practitioners, together with Adventist theologians, missiologists, and stake-holders (such as conference officials) must work through the theological/missiological issues in Muslim ministries first and then devise or implement a sound strategy (which includes finance, jurisdiction, etc.), and not the other way around.

Related to this issue is the ever present danger in missiological circles of allowing pragmatism to dictate theology. As John McVay points out:

A presupposition of the historical sketch seems to be that the success of winning larger numbers. . . . is de facto proof of the superiority of the more numerically successful strategy. Are there other criteria that should vie with the numbers game, however extreme the contrast in results? Surely one such criterion would be fidelity to truths and methods divulged in the Scriptures. (2005:50)

I stress this again—practice should be scrutinized from Adventist biblical, theological, and missiological perspectives.

Issues in Adventist Muslim Ministries

While it is good to study what pertains to Islam (Muhammad, Qur’an, the Islamic pillars, etc.) missiologically in order to find bridges to Islam, one must not forget that all of these have a theological basis which must be taken into consideration. Missiologists complain against systematic theologians because they use cold theology in evaluating Islam. But missiologists have gone the opposite direction, and have tended to focus only on the cultural context, ignoring the obvious theological implications. Neither extreme will give a balanced regard for Islam, Muhammad, and the Qur’an. Today, there is a “tension among Muslim ministries” over “theology and practice” which is somewhat similar to the type of tensions found in the New Testament (Johnson 2011:51). The Adventist Church cannot escape using theology to evaluate Muhammad because missiology is applied theology. It should follow that a good theological foundation undergirds good missiological reflection. For whether we like it or not, theology dictates methodology, and methodology reveals one’s theology.

Some Islamic scholars frown on theological evaluations of Islam, Mu-
hammad, and the Qur’an because they say it does not help people to build bridges. That is not necessarily true. Even a theological evaluation would reveal doctrinal similarities that could be used as a point of agreement or a starting point for a conversation. What I am suggesting is that Adventist Muslim ministry practitioners should never turn a blind eye on issues where Islam departs from or even contradicts the teachings of the Bible. If we become totally like Muslims in our regard for Islam then we are in danger of fitting the description of the blind who “lead the blind” (Luke 6:39) and we will all fall into the ditch!

So what are the issues that need resolving in Adventist Muslim ministries? I propose the importance of finding a theological/missiological stand on seven issues that are consistent with an Adventist theological/ecclesiological framework. Below I list the seven missiological areas, followed by a series of questions which, I believe, Adventist Muslim ministry practitioners need to grapple with.

The Core of the Gospel

Johnson (2011:56) suggests that “to focus on the core doctrines, rather than the oft-debated details of practice and strategy—may be the most important aid to renewed unity among evangelical Christian workers.” But the question remains, what constitutes the core of the Christian faith which should be shared with Muslims? While it is a given in contextualization practices that there are essentials (core) and there are negotiables, the question is: Who decides what that core is? As McVay puts it:

How do we identify “core elements of Adventist faith” or the shape of “a saving faith experience”? Who decides whether a particular attempt or approach represents reductionism on the one hand or a clear-headed, Spirit-inspired approach to remove unnecessary cultural baggage and re-contextualize the Seventh-day Adventist message on the other? (2005:50)

This is a very important question—one that is not so easily answered without discussing the essence of the gospel message. Furthermore, this highlights the importance of making sure that we do not corrupt the entire message in our effort to keep Muslims from stumbling over the gospel.

Related to this is the question of how many of the Adventist fundamental beliefs must be taught to those coming to faith? When do we regard them as ready for baptism? And do we regard baptism as entry into the Adventist Church as well?
The Prophethood of Muhammad

Is Muhammad a divinely-inspired prophet? Can he be compared to Balaam of old? Is he God’s messenger to the Arabs? Should he be judged by the biblical tests of a prophet or is his claim and that of the Qur'an a reliable basis for accepting his prophethood? There are those who totally refuse to talk about Muhammad, but when talking with a Muslim, it is very difficult, if not impossible, not to be confronted with the question, “What do you think of Muhammad?” Osindo (2005:189) has correctly observed that “Christians and Muslims alike cannot adequately address the subject of Christian-Muslim relations without relating to the life of the prophet Mohammad.” Being a person who is “the most highly esteemed. . . in Islam,” a Muslim ministry practitioner cannot escape dealing with the issue of the prophethood of Muhammad (189).

There are basically three Christian schools of thought on how to relate to Muhammad and Islam.

First, the critical school: For them, Muhammad is “a false prophet” and Islam is “the religion of anti-Christ” (Osindo 2005:189). Among Seventh-day Adventists, proponents of this view include Borge Schantz and Samuel Bacchiocchi. 2

Second, the high contextual or bridge-building school: In this view, Muhammad should be examined only “within the context in which he lived” and people should relate to both Muhammad and Islam based on the values and interpretation given by Muslims themselves. “It is only after examining his life within the context in which he lived that we may formulate a basis on which we might relate to Islam today from a bridge building perspective” (Osindo 2005:189).

Thus, for this school Muhammad is indeed a prophet for Muslims, and Islam is indeed God’s revelation for Muslims within their cultural and historical milieu. The basis for such an evaluation is the process of bridge-building in which one compares Muhammad “to other biblical prophets. . . who were in similar circumstances” as he was (Osindo 2005:193).

Third, the progressive school: Muhammad, in this view, is a social and religious reformer whom God has allowed to reign and introduce significant cultural, religious, and political advances in the world, somewhat similar to Nebuchadnezzar of old. In later eras he could perhaps be compared to Protestant reformers like Luther and Calvin, but hardly with biblical prophets. The progressive school would give Muhammad as much credit for his contribution to the religion and culture of 1.2 billion Muslims as possible, but would apply the biblical tests of a prophet in much the same way one would test others claiming direct divine inspiration. When it comes to dealing with social issues and innovations, this school agrees with Gilchrist that Muhammad needs to be judged “by the standards of

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his day” (Gilchrist, in Osindo 2005:196). However, when it comes to his claim to divine inspiration, he can only be judged by the standards set in the Bible for the authentic gift of prophecy.

The Authority of the Qur’an

The third issue deals with the question of whether or not the Qur’an is another divinely inspired Holy Book. Is it a dictation received from God himself? Is it to be accorded equal status with the Bible? Is it really comparable and as inspired as the Taurat (Old Testament)? Should the Qur’an be harmonized with the Bible (and the Bible with the Qur’an)? Should a practitioner use the Qur’an as a basis for biblical teaching? How should Adventist practitioners, as well as Muslim background believers, relate to the Qur’an? This area needs to be understood before field practitioners continue using the Qur’an in Muslim outreach. Whether one uses the Qur’an or not, one needs to realize and silently answer the inherent question of a Muslim when one begins to use their scripture: “Do you believe in the Qur’an?”

Ganoune Diop observes that “to communicate with Muslims and bypass the Qur’an deprives anyone who wishes to share the gospel with Muslims of the awareness of the subtext that informs Muslims’ thinking, ethos, hopes, fears, and arguments” (2005:168).

Just as with the prophethood of Muhammad, there are at least three Christian views concerning the Qur’an.

First, the Qur’an as an anti-Christian book: Again as with the prophethood, we must test Scriptures using the four tests of inspiration. Those who hold that the Qur’an is an anti-Christian book have reasons for holding this position. The Qur’an has not only repeatedly claimed that Muhammad is inspired by God, it states that Jesus is not the “Son of God” and that he never died. These are core doctrines that are very fundamental to the Christian faith. Christian disappointment with the Qur’an is summed up in Diop’s observation:

One would expect if the Qur’an signaled the dawn of the climax of God’s revelation, that the best in former Scriptures be referred to and then surpassed. The non-abrogation of war does not resonate with the message Jesus brought. The injunction to exterminate pagan idolaters, whatever the reasons, poses difficulty . . . . Key themes such as salvation, justification, sanctification, glorification, the vision of God face to face for an everlasting communion, and fellowship with him and with one another are not the focus of the Qur’anic message. (2005:170)
Gottfried Oosterwal asserts that “the relation between the Bible and the Qur'an is not one of comparison but of contrast. . . . The differences between the Bible and Qur'an can never be reconciled. In the minds of many, this precludes the use of the Qur'an as a way to lead Muslims to Christ (2005:180, 181).

He further observes that several scholars conclude that in reality there is no point of contact, no bridge of communication between the gospel and the Qur'an. . . . the differences are too deep and too radical. Comparing the inner core of the two religions is like comparing darkness and light, truth and falsehood. And the same applies to all elements shaped by these two cores. . . . The use of the Qur'an leads only to syncretism, to a distortion and denigration of true biblical teachings. (Oosterwal 2005:183).

Second, the Qur'an as a divinely inspired book: Christians who look at the Qur'an as an inspired book point to the many parallels and overlaps between the Qur'an and the Bible (Johnson 2011:53). They advocate using these Qur'anic sections when teaching Bible doctrines. As for the seeming contradictions between the Bible and Qur'an, they advocate the use of Muslim interpretations rather than Christian biblical hermeneutics. This, they claim will make the Qur'anic passages easier to understand and will help smooth out any seeming contradictions.

Third, the Qur'an as an influential religious-socio-cultural book: This view believes that the Qur'an contains a lot of sound advices, even biblical concepts and truth. The Qur'an is regarded as a religious-socio-cultural book written with the Arab world in mind and containing many truths in it. The presence of such truths may be attributed to the fact that some truths are self-revelatory, while others came from Christian and Jewish sources. This view advocates judging the Qur'an by the Bible in response to two assertions found in the Qur'an itself.

First, that if there is doubt in what was revealed to Muhammad, Muslims must go to the People of the Book (to ascertain if it is true). In Sura 10:94, Muhammad was told that if he had any doubts about the content of the Qur'an, he should “ask those who have been reading the Book from before [him].”

Second, the Qur'an claims itself as confirming the Bible. Sura 5:48 says, “To thee We sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety: so judge between them by what God hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the Truth that hath come to thee. To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way.” This latter school of thought advocates “merely raising
questions” to guide the conversation towards Christian understandings (Johnson 2011:53). It further “pleads for the use of the Qur’an in Christian missionary endeavors ‘as [an] initial bridge’” (Oosterwal 2005:183).

The Pillars of Islam

How should Christians relate to the five pillars of Islam? Should they be carried over to the Muslim Background Believers’ (MBB) religious experience? For instance, should an MBB still perform the salah (with ablution, facing Mecca), recite the shahadah, give the zakat, observe the Ramadan fast, and go on a Pilgrimage? Should they be spiritualized or given Christian functional substitutes that are compatible with the Christian faith? Are they really necessary to the growth of one’s faith, especially once MBBs begin to walk with Jesus? Are some not detrimental to growth in grace and faith? Do they not lead to a legalistic or syncretistic faith that is neither Muslim nor Christian?

Identity of Believers

What kind of identity should practitioners and MBBs take? Are they to be identified with the old religion or with the Adventist (Christian) faith? When one calls himself a Muslim without a qualifier, is this deceptive or merely a strategic decision? If the term “Christian” is bad, is it alright to just use “Adventist” as a separate type of religion? Do practitioners really have to identify themselves as legal Muslims to be effective and to be able to work among Muslims?

Johnson states that he personally would never call himself a “‘Muslim’ in a way that suggests” that he is “not a Christian” although he had “joined in Muslim prayers (while silently ‘bearing witness’ to Christ), participated in the fast of Ramadan, and dressed in ways that are locally appropriate” (2011:53). Such an approach, he reports, “has often led to conversations and insights that otherwise would not have occurred” (53, 54). Whitehouse sums up the issue of identity as touching ethical, ecclesiological, spiritual, missiological, and global citizenship issues (Whitehouse 2005b:98-99). However, the most pressing and most debated aspect of this issue has to do with the matter of deception. Related to this, Johnson feels that it depends on what one’s intention is. He explains:

The main issue is whether the intention is to deceive. If an outsider seeks to fool locals into thinking he or she is one of them, there are potentially major ethical and personal consequences. If, on the other hand, the purpose is to adapt, live, and speak in ways that are culturally appropriate, I see no reason to object, as long as the implications have been thought through carefully. (2011:54)
Whitehouse feels that “our identity as instruments of change and the identity of the new believer, will be critical to even getting a hearing in the Muslim setting, not to mention establishing a sustainable witness to biblical truth” (2005b:99). He asserts that taking on a Muslim identity “is not ‘covert’ or ‘deceptive,’ but is simply good communication strategy” (117). Some strategists however are concerned that once their true identity as Seventh-day Adventist Christians is discovered, it will bring in suspicion and result in a sense of betrayal on the side of the Muslim community, not to mention the possibility of reprisals against the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

John Kent agrees with Whitehouse in “hiding our identity” if that means the “institutional identity” but not “our peculiar identity as an end-time calling-out movement or to grant to Islam or any other belief system a level of validity that simply cannot be biblically substantiated” (2005:132).

Islam and the Remnant (An Ecclesiological Question)

Is Islam a religion from God? Can culture and religion be separated in Islam? Can God’s remnant community be found in Islam until the end of time? Is it God’s purpose to have people remain in Islam and to merely develop their spirituality within that religion? Can a segment of the Islamic community be a local manifestation of God’s remnant people? If we are calling people out of Christian denominations, why should we not call people out of Islam? Is Islam a much better religion than Roman Catholicism or Hinduism or Buddhism or any other world religion, for that matter? Can MBBs become full-pledged members of God’s remnant and still consistently remain a full-fledged Muslim? Whitehouse explains that:

God has acted through a variety of people and nations to effect his purposes in history, and, further, that God has been active in revealing truth through chosen messengers, some of them known to us through writings that have been preserved under the guidance of God’s Spirit and others unknown to us today. In this context, it is understood that the original intent of Islam, has in God’s purpose, contributed to the restoration of certain important truth, namely: The truth of One God. . . . That a day of judgment is awaiting everyone . . . [and] social justice. (2005b:120)

Whitehouse believes that Islam is a religion that has “fallen victim to apostasy” whose “original values” “have been gradually compromised in the majority of their followers” as manifested by “certain folk beliefs, belief in power objects, places and people, and in militant intolerance and
violence” (2005b:120). Thus, he suggests that “within Islam there are such people of authentic faith sincerely concerned about their submission to the One true God, their preparation for the day of judgment, but lacking a certainty of salvation” (120).

He goes on to say that while “there are particular areas of disagreement with Muslims . . . these differences are not to be made points of argument . . . but should provide an opportunity for respectful exchange” (121).

Kent seems to disagrees with the proposition that Adventist MBBs should work for “revival and reform” inside Islam, as if Islam “has simply lost its way and needs to return to its roots” (2005:130). He fears that such a position may be “granting too much to Islam” (130). “Islam as a system of belief, does not contain a complete or wholly accurate portrayal of the character of God and of the pathway to freedom and salvation from the penalty, power, and ultimately the presence of sin (128).

Kent stands by the unique ecclesiological and eschatological understanding of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He writes,

Throughout much of the last 150 years, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has perceived itself to be the sole institution through whom God is calling all peoples to a full understanding of himself and his salvific purposes. With this critical self-understanding in place, our expectation is that people of all other faiths . . . must align themselves with our denomination in order to be counted (in human terms) as fully embracing biblical or ‘present’ truth. This includes not only participation in our fundamental beliefs and experience, but also alignment with the organizational and administrative structures of denominational church life, including paying tithe to the structure and participation in church initiatives though they are often not suited to specific cultures, etc. (2005:129)

The Nature of Adventist Mission

Is the purpose of Adventist mission to get people to become better, more spiritual Muslims, or to call them out of Islamic darkness into God’s marvelous light? Is Adventist mission to develop faith within their context, making some sense out of the confusion of beliefs? Or has the Adventist Church been commissioned to call Muslims to leave false beliefs and practices and become one with God’s Remnant Church? Is the purpose of Adventist mission merely to lead Muslims to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior (in the tradition of popular evangelical evangelists) or also to disciple them to become responsible members of the Lord’s body, and to prepare them for the Lord’s return? Is Adventist mission merely to preach
the initial gospel or also to teach them everything Jesus has commanded his followers to do?

Conclusion

I realize that this article has raised more questions than can be answered by any single person or separate groups of field practitioners, administrators, theologians, or missiologists. That was exactly my purpose for this paper.

As already intimated above, Adventist Muslim ministry practitioners should not ignore these questions. Instead, they need to sit down and grapple with these issues openly among themselves, but not only among themselves. They also need to interact with church administrators, theologians, and missiologists (and not necessarily in that order) because Muslim ministries belong to the whole church. These issues are not only relevant to a few select individuals. The extreme difficulty of reaching Muslims requires the united efforts and resources of the entire Adventist Church. A clearer and unified presentation of the biblically/theological and missiological foundation of Adventist Muslim ministry that is fundamentally supported by the general Adventist theological and missiological community would, in my thinking, help begin to push forward the frontiers of this much needed mission endeavor.

Notes

1“When modern ears hear the word ‘nation’ we immediately think of the idea of a ‘country’ or a ‘nation state’. But the Greek word is *ethne* from which we get our word ‘ethnic’. Although the term sometimes was used to refer to all non-Jews or to all non-Christians, when it is used with the Greek word meaning ‘all’, it should be given its most common meaning: an ethnic or cultural people group” (Hawthorne 2009:128).

2“Borge Schantz has concluded that Islam is an anti-Christ force which needs to be confronted and error pointed out” while Samuele Bacchiocchi, taking “an extremely confrontational approach towards Mohammad and Islam. . . . sees nothing positive on which to build bridges of understanding. He equates Islam with the papacy and goes further to call the Muslim god a criminal” (Osindo 2005:192).

Works Cited


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