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Adventist Use of the Qur'an: An Old Debate

In recent decades, Seventh-day Adventists have had several interactions discussing the use of the Qur'an for mission. Some Adventist ministers and workers have used the Qur'an as a tool to draw people into a discussion of faith and to guide people into an understanding of God that fits with the biblical portrayal. This has not been without controversy, and debate has taken place in formal and informal ways. This issue is often described as though it was a new form of mission Adventists are utilizing on the cutting edge of mission (Diop 2005; Maberly 2006).¹ What this article demonstrates is that there have been Adventists who used the Qur'an in their discussions of faith with Muslims for nearly 100 years, if not more. The debate may feel fresh, but it is not a new debate. This article focuses on several examples from the 1920s through 1963.²

Early Examples

From the 1890s to the 1920s, there was a large movement of Muslims in Ethiopia who shifted towards Christianity, primarily through the influence of Aleka Zekarias. Zekarias was a well-educated Muslim who claimed to have had dreams leading him to see Christ in the Qur'an and to read the Bible (WoldeSelassie 2005:59-60). He spent his life demonstrating how the Qur'an and the Bible agreed on many theological points (34, 35). Those who followed him were labeled "Mohammedan Christians" or "new Christians" to differentiate them from their Muslim background and Orthodox Christians around them (35).

Zekarias, through his study of the Qur'an and Bible, concluded that baptism should be performed through immersion and that Sunday was not a valid day of worship (163). He emphasized the Sabbath and also spoke out against praying through the saints and Mary. At the same time, many Muslim leaders were upset with him and took him to court claiming he was teaching the Qur'an inaccurately (43). He was acquitted on several different occasions and eventually was dragged before the Emperor Menelik II. Menelik also acquitted Zekarias, which put an end to the lawsuits (45-48, 91-92, 100-101).

There were several Christian mission agencies that knew about and interacted with Zekarias, most prominently the Swedish Mission of Asmara in modern day Eritrea. Zekarias never met a Seventh-day Adventist but one of his disciples, Aleka Motbainor, after hearing of Adventists, met some in Addis Ababa in 1920 or 1921 (160, 162). Motbainor was impressed by the Adventist message and shared it with some of the disciples of Zekarias.³ As a result, a significant number became Adventists. According to interviews with Montbainor, he and others continued to have a high view of the Qur'an and the Arabic language.

Truneh WoldeSelassie, in his history of Seventh-day Adventists in Ethiopia, gives the most complete details of this Adventist connection. While some of the details are difficult to verify, overall, WoldeSelassie provides ample evidence for this history.⁴ This is one of the earliest extant examples of a Seventh-day Adventist who used the Qur'an in their faith journey and saw it as a valid source of knowledge about God.

There are a few other intriguing, though obscure, references to Seventh-day Adventists advocating use of the Qur'an in the 1930s. In the December issue of *Ministry* magazine of 1937, J. F. Huenergardt wrote:

The missionary to the Moslems, by carefully studying the Koran and comparing it with the Bible, will soon discover that many passages in it are similar to passages of Scripture. There are many places in the Koran which refer to the Scriptures. This affords ample opportunity for the missionary worker to prepare his studies on topics familiar to the Moslem mind, and to use passages which are contained in both the Koran and the Bible. The faithful and patient presentation of these in the spirit of kindness and love will not fail to win the heart of the Moslem and arouse his desire for further knowledge. (1937:10)

Huenergardt does not clarify if he knew Muslims personally and followed his own advice. Little is known about Huenergardt beyond the fact that he served as editor for the German magazine *Christlicher Hausfreund*, an Adventist publication that came out of Brookfield, Illinois. It is hard to imagine Huenergardt giving this advice if he had no personal experience

with Muslims. Yet, at the same time, unless it is discovered that he had served as a missionary outside the United States, it is unlikely that he had Muslim contacts in America, as there were very few living in the United States at this time. Nevertheless, Huenergardt, for whatever reason, advocated using passages from the Qur'an that agreed with the Bible as a way to engage with Muslims and try to "win" their hearts.

In 1939, V. E. Toppenberg reported on Zakaria Mulindwa in Uganda becoming an Adventist. Mulindwa grew up in a Muslim home, studied, and became a leading "sheik" in the community. He built a mosque and was known for his ability to teach Islam in the village. Frequently Mulindwa debated with Christians, often defeating them with his arguments. However, through the work of an unnamed colporteur, he was exposed to Adventist literature, which he compared with the Qur'an. Through the process, the article claims that "in the Bible and the Koran he found more and more proofs substantiating what he had read in our books, and having become thoroughly convinced of the importance of the message, he fearlessly began to present the truth to his Mohammedan congregation" (1939:15). Mulindwa found proof for his newfound faith in both the Bible and the Qur'an. I have not been able to find much else on Mulindwa, and thus am unable to comment on whether or not he used the Qur'an in sharing his faith after this point.

These two examples are admittedly obscure. Scant evidence does not allow for detailed speculation regarding the use of the Qur'an by the individuals discussed above. One wonders how these articles were accepted and discussed by readers at the time. Needless to say, the Qur'an, as early as the 1930s, was seen by at least a few Adventists as a valid source to engage with, and their views were deemed worthy of publishing.

Erich Bethmann, who became the foremost expert on Islam among Adventists by the 1950s, advocated "explaining the Koran" to Muslims as an appropriate form of mission work (1947:16). Bethmann did not have much experience directly doing this himself, but he was convinced this was an appropriate and necessary part of mission among Muslims through his time in the Middle East.⁵ What this, and the examples above demonstrate, is that some Adventists were acquainted with the Qur'an and regarded it as a source that could be used when interacting with Muslims.

North African Usage

J. Reynaud, a pastor in the Mostaganem Seventh-day Adventist Church, located in present-day Algeria, strongly advocated the use of the Qur'an for mission purposes. He wrote:

Before we can sow, we must break the ground. This work should be undertaken in humility and without prejudice. We must learn how to lead to the Bible by means of the Koran. For Islam—not as it is practiced by the ignorant masses, but as taught by the Koran—is nearer to the truth than many so-called Christian churches today. A celebrated theologian has defined it as a sect of Christianity. According to the Koran, Christ is living, He is the Creator, He is holy, His birth was supernatural, He was to die and rise again. . . . We must approach the Mohammedan from the viewpoint of the many doctrines which unite us, rather than offending him by denouncing his false beliefs. We must avoid wounding delicate sensibilities. Our work is not to judge but to save. (1953:10, 11)

It is not stated explicitly in the article that Reynaud had used the Qur'an in the way he advises, but he may have tested this in the local context where he lived. He wrote in a tone of certainty that hints this was a tested method. By the time Reynaud wrote the article, he had several years of experience in North Africa, including several public meetings, which had more success among Europeans living in North Africa than among Muslims, which probably led him to rethink his approach (Benitez and Wixwat 2020).

As with the examples found in the previous section, evidence is lacking as to the actual use or impact directly with Muslims. Today there are very few Adventists in this region, and the long-term impact of Adventists has been minimal. Nonetheless, Reynaud, through his experience in the North African context, felt it necessary to advise, in print, the usage of the Qur'an for mission purposes.

Indonesia and Rifai Burhanu'ddin

The most prominent case of an Adventist using the Qur'an for mission purposes is found in Indonesia starting in the 1950s and going into the 1960s. Rifai Burhanu'ddin was a Muslim who became an active Adventist worker among Muslims in Indonesia. Several articles in Adventist periodicals tell of his conversion and describe his work for the church. Other articles record stories of Muslims who became more open to Christ or joined the church as a result of interactions with Burhanu'ddin or his writings.

Burhanu'ddin, through his knowledge of the Qur'an and his experience of sharing it with others, was convinced that much biblical truth could be demonstrated directly from the Qur'an. As a result, he wrote a book in Bahasa Indonesian that is titled *Jesus Christ in the Koran* when translated. The Center for Adventist Research at Andrews University

holds an English translation of this book. The book's publication date is 1955, which predates the first mentions of Burhanu'ddin in extant English Adventist periodicals.⁶

Burhanu'ddin's book was written to share with Muslims. It is somewhat apologetic in tone. It could be argued that the Bible is portrayed so that the reader would believe it was the final arbiter of truth. At the same time, the Qur'an is never denigrated and is quoted from and put into dialogue with the Bible so that it comes across as a valid source of knowledge and information about God.⁷ It is difficult to ascertain his exact view on the relationship between the Bible and the Qur'an (1955). What can be deduced is that Burhanu'ddin was sharing about God with Muslims using the Bible and the Qur'an, and this drew some Muslims to reconsider their approach to faith and, in a few cases, they joined the Adventist Church.

The first reference to Burhanu'ddin in an English periodical is an article written by Burhanu'ddin for the *Far Eastern Division Outlook* in 1958.⁸ Burhanu'ddin mentions that he and his wife had experienced "much abuse and endured much jesting" since being baptized into the Adventist Church (1958:14). This experience, he claims, led him to write the book *Isa Didalam Al Qur'an*. The impression given here is that Burhanu'ddin felt he and his wife had experienced undue hardship due to the way Muslims and Adventists understood each other. He claimed that after writing and sharing the book, it has "been easier for me to save souls" (1958:15). In the article, Burhanu'ddin goes on to relay that colporteurs were selling his book and that he was studying with "20 students of the Islam faith" (1958:15). Burhanu'ddin also states that on February 27, 1958, he officially resigned from his post as a government schoolteacher to work full time for the Adventist Church (1958). This means, for several years, Burhanu'ddin was working for the government of Indonesia and sharing his faith at the same time. One wonders how many contacts and how much influence he left behind by leaving his post with the government to work for the education department of the Church.

Interdivision Islamic Institute 1963

The wider Adventist world came to know about Burhanu'ddin, and he was invited to be a presenter at the Interdivision Islamic Institute held in Beirut, Lebanon, from September 6-19, 1963. This was one of the earliest instances when several church leaders gathered to discuss Adventist work among Muslims. Within this interaction, there was an extended debate on the appropriateness of using the Qur'an as a mission method. The discussion stemmed primarily from two presentations that Burhanu'ddin gave entitled "The Bible in Muslim Thought," and "Christ in Muslim Thought."

Burhanu'ddin explained that he was able to demonstrate the reality of the Holy Spirit from the Qur'an and that the purpose of the Qur'an was to confirm the Bible (Burhanu'ddin 1963:51-52). These ideas are found in his first presentation; however, it was his second presentation that went even further into Qur'an usage. Burhanu'ddin maintained that there were several ideas he was able to show Muslims from the Qur'an, including the Only Begotten Son of God, the Trinity, how Jesus is Lord and God, Jesus dying for sinners, and the Second Coming (53-57).

As a result, an entire session of the conference was devoted to questions and answers on the use of the Qur'an. Burhanu'ddin was not the only participant to state that they used the Qur'an according to the typed-up report of the session. Others, such as Esaie Pellicer, also answered questions on how they used the Qur'an. However, Pellicer's answers reveal that his use of the Qur'an was more simplistic and done with the desire of immediately transition from the Qur'an to the Old Testament (1963:162). Pellicer agreed with Burhanu'ddin that the best approach to Muslims was through the Qur'an, but Salim Elias, another participant, is recorded as disagreeing with both of them. When asked why he was opposed, Elias claimed that the Qur'an was too difficult to understand and that Muslims too easily explained contradictions by asserting abrogation. Pellicer answered this challenge by claiming that a good Muslim would only accept what was in the Qur'an, and so it was logical to start from there. Pellicer made sure to add that the Bible was introduced "as soon as possible" (1963:163).

There was disagreement among the participants, though the extent is hard to gauge, as the recording of the meeting is a summary that lacks detail. The typed record does state, in regards to the use of the Qur'an that "it was the consensus of opinion that the worker was to use the method he considered best in his area" (1963:164). While this does not appear to have been voted it indicates that there was some sense of agreement on the need for flexibility.

The final section of the typed report on this session is a copy of a small-translated booklet provided by Burhanu'ddin. He had written it for sharing with "fanatical" Muslims in Indonesian villages. He desired that the booklet be printed outside of Indonesia as he did not believe he would be allowed to print it inside Indonesia. The booklet contained several *surahs* from the Qur'an, copied to demonstrate the similarity between the message of the Qur'an passages chosen with the Bible (1963:164-166). Further research is needed to find out whether this booklet was printed and distributed as hoped.

Conclusion

This article does not clarify whether or not the use of the Qur'an is appropriate or inappropriate for mission engagement. Rather, it is meant to demonstrate that usage of the Qur'an has been a part of some Adventist's engagement with Islam for decades. This is much earlier than many assume. Not only was it used, but some Adventists strongly advocated its use after experiencing positive interactions through qur'anic use among Muslims in the field. This usage led to a significant discussion of the issue among several prominent church leaders in 1963 in Beirut, Lebanon. At this meeting, a consensus was agreed upon to use what methods they felt best within their ministry contexts. More research is needed to evaluate and uncover more on this topic that has repeatedly come to the forefront in Adventist discussions on Islam.

Endnotes

¹Diop does not demonstrate any knowledge of the earlier Adventist discussions on the use of the Qur'an in his chapter in *Faith Development in Context*, which was originally a presentation at a major conference on Adventists mission among Muslims which took place at Andrews University. He attempts to come at the discussion as though this is new to Adventists when it had been discussed for decades, as this article demonstrates. Clifton Maberly presented a paper for the General Conference Issues Committee that was subsequently published in 2006 on the Adventist use of non-Christian Scriptures. He also does not demonstrate any knowledge of the prior Adventist discussions on Qur'an usage.

²There are plenty of examples of Adventists discussing and using the Qur'an after 1963. This article focuses on the earlier period to demonstrate how old the discussion actually is.

³At this point Zekarias had passed away.

⁴WoldeSelassie's sources include interviews of key pastors who were alive in the 1920s in Ethiopia, including Motbainor. Motbainor also gave WoldeSelassie access to several written works of Zekarias that were written in Arabic and translated into Amharic (2005:35). Some of those are then translated into English by WoldeSelassie and included in his book on the history of Seventh-day Adventists in Ethiopia (118-155). Beyond these sources he includes several non-Adventist witnesses along with references to journal articles that discussed the movement surrounding Zekarias. See Iwarsson 1924; Crummey 1972. Crummey's article contains a number of valuable references in his footnotes and also Crummey briefly mentions the Adventist connection (66).

⁵In Bethmann's groundbreaking book *Bridge to Islam*, published in 1950, he does not explicitly discuss using the Qur'an in mission. However, he demonstrates an in-depth working knowledge of the Qur'an and compares Qur'anic teachings with the Bible. For more on Bethmann, see Tompkins 2017: 111-114.

⁶Further research in periodicals written in Indonesian might uncover earlier references to Burhanu'ddin. Considering the English version of the book was probably translated sometime after the original was written in Indonesia, it is safe to assume that Burhanu'ddin had written the book even earlier than 1955.

⁷One of the more fascinating chapters in the book is on whether or not Muhammad could be considered a true prophet of God. The chapter implies that Muhammad is a true prophet using a conceptual theological framework incorporating the pouring out of the Holy Spirit spoken of by Jesus in the book of John. Burhanu'ddin reasons that since the Spirit was poured out on many people, then it is plausible the Spirit was poured out on Muhammad and that his teachings come from God.

⁸The author's name listed for this article is spelled Rifai Boerhanoe'ddin. In most subsequent references and the previous reference found in the 1955 book, the spelling is Burhanu'ddin. There is no doubt these names are the same person. I have chosen to use the latter spelling in this article.

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