

Are Mormons the Bridge Between the Christian and Muslim Faiths?

By George Potter

Early LDS leaders made many complimentary statements about Islam. It became obvious to observers that the restored gospel had tenets familiar to both the mainstream Christian faiths of the day and what appeared to be elements of Islam as practiced in the nineteenth century. For this reason, some writers called the Mormons the *American Mohammedans*. The great English explorer, Sir Richard Burton, traveled to Utah in order to meet what he called the American Muslims.

Today, when many of us hear the word "Muslim," our souls fill with distain. Why? Because of the despicable acts of a few evil Muslim extremists. If this is how you feel about all Muslims, then perhaps it is time to step back and remember that Mormons might have a unique responsibility to play in bringing together God's children in the Last Days. On 10 October 2006, in a devotional at Brigham Young University, Elder Boyd K. Packer, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, introduced Dr. Alwi Shihab with these words:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints expresses "special love and concern for the eternal welfare of all men and women, regardless of religious belief, race, or nationality, knowing that we are truly brothers and sisters because we are sons and daughters of the same Eternal Father."¹

We believe that "the great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals."²

It is not a coincidence that the world's great religions come together at Temple Hill in modern-day Jerusalem. Known now as the Place of the Rock, it is a religious shrine for Islam, for Christianity, and for Judaism. All three great religions hold ties to this place. All three, likewise, have a common thread in a tradition that Elijah the prophet would return.³

Knit together by world history and by Old Testament history and doctrine, the Church and the Islamic world can see each other as People of the Book, indeed Family of the Book.

Church members and Muslims share similar high standards of decency, temperance, and morality. We have so much in common. As societal morality and behavior decline in an increasingly permissive world, the Church and many within Islam increasingly share natural affinities.

Muslim scholars point out that the Quran does not restrict Paradise to Muslims. The Quran rewards all those of faith who perform righteousness and believe in the after-life. The Book calls Jesus Christ Messiah, Son of Mary, and by the names Messenger, Prophet, Servant, Word, and Spirit of God.⁴

It is important that we in the West understand there is a battle for the heart, soul, and direction of Islam and that not all Islam espouses violent jihad, as some Western media portray.

It is as well important that friends in the Islamic world understand there is a battle for the heart, soul, and direction of the Western world and that not all the West is morally decadent, as some Islamic media portray.

Several years ago, I was invited to speak at a convention of insurance executives in Vail, Colorado. On the way, we crossed the Colorado River.

We could see a new bridge in process of construction. It was an engineering marvel. Anchored to the sheer stone walls on both sides was an abutment for the bridge. Launching out into space from that abutment, reaching out for the other side, were sections of steel girders. When they met and were locked together in the middle 1,000 feet above the Colorado River, each would give strength to the other, and that bridge would be locked together over which traffic of all kinds could flow back and forth safely and conveniently.

Alwi, a devout Muslim of Arabic ancestry, and I, a Christian and devout Mormon, have agreed to symbolically walk arm in arm into the future. Together we hope to build a bridge. Except [Unless] what that symbolizes is accomplished, all of us face a very dark and very dangerous future.

Now I introduce Dr. Alwi Shihab with a title which I borrow from another venerable Islamic leader and cleric (whom we both know and love), Abdurrahman Wahid, former president of Indonesia—*Gus Dur*. I apply that title to you, Alwi. You know that by interpretation it means “Dear Friend.”

Are you a bridge builder or a wrecking crew? There are only two types of people. A man can only serve one master.

For the last fifteen years, I have lived in Saudi Arabia. I am the only American and Christian who works in my office building. I arrive home each evening by entering the Oasis Residential Compound where 22 people were murdered by Islamic fanatics less than three years ago. To enter my house I pass through three security gates with bomb-sniffing dogs, and two cement bunkers with machine guns pointed at me. As strange as it might sound to some people, I still believe that the Arab Muslims I associate with are some of the nicest, most gracious, hospitable, and moral people I have met in my world travels.

Perhaps Mormons are not the religious glue that will hold our disturbed world together, but we should still follow the example of President Packer and reach out to befriend and understand our Islamic brothers and sisters.

There is a secondary reason why Mormons should try to understand the beliefs of Muslims: the Arabs will play an important role in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ! From the Dome of the Rock to bin Laden, it is impossible to interpret what is going on in our day unless we understand the Arab mindset.

An Arab role in the coming of Christ? Isn't that an oxymoron?

Not within the Islamic belief system; indeed, the Muslims look forward with joy to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

From the moderate Arab executive walking the streets of Cairo to the mad Islami-fascist bin Laden hiding in his dugout, Muslims world-wide believe that the Last Days are upon us, and this notion is affecting the way they behave. For example, as the Jews complete their massive wall meant to protect them from Palestinian terrorists, the Arabs outside Palestine are not protesting its construction. Why? The reason is simple; they believe it is the fulfillment of the prophecy given to Mohammed that in the Last Days the Arabs would be fighting Jews within walls. Qur'an 59:14 "*They [Muslims] will not fight you [People of the Book/Jews] (Even) together, except in fortified townships, or from behind walls.*"

Mohammed made some forty predictions about the Last Days, ten of which are considered primary indicators that of the Day of Judgment is at hand. These include:

- A fog (smog) that will cloud the world (note: smog from China is currently destroying the glaciers in Bolivia).
- A climate will shift that will return rain to the deserts (global warming is expected to eventually cause a new ice-age and bring increased rain to Arabia).
- In the Last Days a man will be able to pray in Syria in the morning and again in Mecca (Saudi Arabia) in the afternoon (today the distance from Syria to Mecca is only a 2-hour airplane trip).
- The people will become wealthy but reject the teachings of the prophets.
- The oceans will overflow upon the lands, great storms will occur, and earthquakes will destroy cities.
- War and bloodshed will abound.

Today many people are wondering just what has gone wrong with the world. They wonder: *Why are some disturbed people trapped into Islamic extremism? Why are fascist Muslims trying to kill us? Are we really in the so-called clash of civilizations?*

My belief is that understanding these crazy days of Islamic jihadists and the USA War on Terrorism is impossible unless one understands just what is going on in the religious mindset of the key players in the Last Days—the Christians, the Jews, and the Muslims.

Perhaps even more shocking to some Latter-day Saints is the idea that the events of the Last Days cannot be understood without knowing the special relationship that exists between the Mormons and the Muslims. Whether you understand it or not, or whether you like it or not, the Mormons might be God's bridge between Christianity and Islam!

For the last twelve years I have developed a series of novels that explore the possible relationships that exist between our faith, the followers of Mohammed, and the observers of Judaism. The novels are my attempt to share with the LDS community the insights I have gained through daily interaction with the Muslims.

The first novel in this series, *The White Bedouin*, will be released in November 2007. I believe the book will change forever your understanding of the Last Days. Even more important, I hope *The White Bedouin* will increase your sense of humanity and will assist you in following the words of President Packer, "to symbolically walk arm

in arm into the future. Together we hope to build a bridge. Except [Unless] what that symbolizes is accomplished, all of us face a very dark and very dangerous future."

Elder Boyd K. Packer's and Dr. Alwi Shihab's entire speeches can be heard or read at:

<http://www.byub.org/devotionals/?selectedMonth=10&selectedYear=2006>

Notes

1. "Statement of the First Presidency regarding God's Love for All Mankind," February 15, 1978.
2. Ibid.
3. See Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple*, [Bookcraft: 1980] 117.
4. See Alwi Shihab, "Jesus in the Quran," Inter-Religious Dialogue Seminar, spring 1992; Alwi Shihab, "Christian-Muslim Relations in the Twenty-first Century," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, January 2004, vol. 15, no. 1, 65–77.