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In Saudi Arabia, a landmark welcome of a Christian scholar

Leonard Swidler, a Christian scholar at Temple University in Philadelphia, visited Saudi Arabia's ultraconservative Al Imam Muhammed bin Saud Islamic University this summer, underscoring a shift toward greater openness in some official religious institutions.

By [Caryle Murphy](#), Correspondent , Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

In a country that endorses Islam as the official religion, bans conversion to other religions, and forbids Christian proselytizing, Saudi Arabia's recent welcome of an American Christian scholar is a landmark.



Leonard Swidler, a professor of religion at Temple University, Philadelphia, has been invited to exchange views about religion at the ultraconservative Al Imam Muhammed bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Leonard Swidler, a professor of Roman Catholic thought and interreligious dialogue at Philadelphia's Temple University, is the first such scholar invited to exchange views with faculty at Al Imam Muhammed bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh – the citadel of [Saudi Arabia's](#) ultraconservative brand of Islam.

Dr. Swidler's visit in late June underscores a shift toward greater openness in some official Saudi religious institutions, which previously had been leery of contact with outsiders of different faiths.

"Maybe it's not exciting for some people, but it's a very big change in Saudi Arabia," says Fahad al-Alhomoudi, a faculty member at Al Imam who helped arrange Swidler's visit.

Swidler called his meetings at Al Imam campus "kind of a breakthrough" during an interview here. "The opportunity to meet with 40 Saudi professors in the area of interreligious dialogue for me was quite extraordinary," he says. Ten of the 40 were women, who [participated via videoconferencing](#).

"I would say that we are experiencing a tipping point right now in relations in the field of religion between the West ... and Islam," added Swidler, a world-recognized expert in interreligious dialogue. "I mean, you can't get more 'heartlander' than Saudi Arabia, as far as Islam is concerned."

First dialogue with Christians and Jews

Swidler's visit came after 14 Al Imam faculty participated last fall in a week-long course at Temple's *Dialogue Institute*, founded by Swidler more than 30 years ago.

The Saudis in the program "were so excited because, for the first time in their lives, they had dialogue with Christians and Jews," says Mr. Alhomoudi, now a consultant to the rector of the all-female Princess Noura University in Riyadh. "They all said that this [experience] should be expanded."

Swidler's visit was intended to discuss areas of future collaboration between his Dialogue Institute and the university's *King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Center for Islamic Contemporary Studies and Dialogue of Civilizations*.

"We need to understand each other," said Abdulmohsin Al Sumih, the center's dean. "That's why we are very keen to see Professor Swidler with us here in our university."

The center was established two years ago in response to a major push by the king to encourage Saudis to communicate with each other and with foreigners of all religious backgrounds. In 2007, the king became the first Saudi monarch to meet a Catholic pope, and the next year he [hosted an international conference](#) on interreligious dialogue in Madrid, which was widely seen as an effort to repair Islam's damaged image after 9/11.

While many Saudis are embracing the new trend of dialogue, the kingdom's official religious establishment has been ambivalent about it. They'll need time, said Alhomoudi. "It's hard for them to swallow a big change."

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