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THE BURDEN OF BAGGAGE

First Generation Issues in Coming to Christ

The Burden of Baggage: *First Generation Issues in Coming to Christ*
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A Brief History



In an effort to understand the context from which the MBB community in the diaspora is formed, we will look at the history of some cultural characteristics and values found in Islamic societies. They make up part of the context into which the new faith is birthed. The Middle East is ancient and culturally rich. A prominent value in Islamic societies is hospitality, almost to a fault. It is not this aspect of Islamic culture that is associated with disharmony. The historical, political, and religious background is important to understand, for it identifies sources of disharmony in the past that shape some of the values expressed in MBB churches today. It is beyond the scope of this book to give a properly balanced and positive perspective of the two competing Islamic societies (the culturally rich and hospitable Muslims and the religious and political expressions) found in their countries.

Throughout the interviews conducted for this book, people mentioned the "baggage" they bring into their Christian experience. People are deeply shaped by their past. It is to this past that I now turn, which will better inform some factors associated with the struggle the MBB church is going through.

Pre-Islamic Times

The Arabian Peninsula, the birthplace of Islam, saw significant changes at the end of the sixth century. The two major empires were those of the Christian Byzantines to the north and west and the Sasanian Persians to the east, who battled each other for a trade route through the peninsula. The newly Christian Ethiopians aligned themselves with the Byzantines to establish a separate and open trade route to the east. They sought to control the Jews of Yemen and push north through the Arabian Peninsula, but instead they were evicted from Arabia and their regime weakened. They were to play a role later with the emergence of

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Islam, accepting the few Muslim converts fleeing the persecution in Mecca as refugees before the *Hijra* in AD 622.

The Sasanian Persians experienced internal problems related to the Zoroastrian faith, leaving them weak and vulnerable. The Christian Byzantines had suffered conflict with the great disputes of the church (Lewis 1995, 45–46). The Arabian Peninsula had a number of foreigners, colonists, refugees, and other groups settling in the region, bringing new ways and ideas with them. Among them were Christians, Jews, and "other monotheistic communities of a 'Gnostic' type such as were then common in Syria" (Hodgson 1977, 159).

Scholars believe that these early monotheists were what the Qur'an calls *hanifs*. There were a few other men of the Quraysh tribe in Muhammad's time who were abandoning paganism and were attracted to this monotheism that valued life more highly than did tribal standards. They were not willing to accept any of the competing religions. These *hanifs* were the earliest converts to the new religion (Lewis 1995, 47). The idea that this monotheism goes back to Abraham is part of the Islamic self-understanding.

In the Islamic scheme of history, the time before Muhammad (AD 610–32) is called *Jahiliyyah* ("time of barbarism or darkness"). It is popularly believed that with the coming of Muhammad, light dawned in the world. The time of Muhammad is considered the height of spiritual enlightenment, and the rest of subsequent history is the loss of the perfect world's luster. The utopian understanding of the past creates a deep desire for a hero. The biographies of the life of Muhammad (*Sira*) bear this out. The evolving retelling of the life of Muhammad throughout the ages ends up with him becoming the ultimate model of human perfection.[14]

This utopian interpretation of history has led to an idealistic view of Islam and is a contributing factor in the disillusionment Muslims are experiencing in light of increased terrorism and destruction perpetrated in the name of Islam. Many secularized and conservative Muslims are disgusted with the carnage, and those living in areas of conflict have been driven from their homes, creating the greatest refugee crisis in modern history. As of the end of 2017, forty million people around the world had been forced to flee their homes due to conflict and violence in fifty seven countries and one territory. In 2017, a total of 30.6 million new displacements were recorded in 135 countries. Many of these areas are in Muslim majority regions or countries.[15]

14 Tarif Khalidi (2009) chronicles how the Muhammad of history has been sanitized of human faults and understood through a hagiographic interpretation to be the greatest of kings, the most rational of statesmen, the wisest of legislators, the most courageous of commanders, the most pious of believers, and the greatest reformer of ideas and manners.

15 The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) provides high-quality data, analysis and expertise on internal displacement worldwide. http://www.internal-displacement.org/

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Many Muslims who have heard all their lives that Islam is perfection are now skeptical of all religion. They have had their hopes brutally dashed at the hands of trusted Islamic and world leaders. This "Paradise Lost" is one of the contributing factors to Muslims considering the claims of Christ.

Shi'a History

Religion plays an important part in the identity of Iran. Iranians have a history of invasions; they were invaded by Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, and Turks. Nevertheless, during times of foreign rule the Persians retained their culture and succeeded in turning their conquerors into Persians. Prior to the Islamic invasion in the seventh century AD, Zoroastrianism was the religion of Persia, which has shaped part of the Iranian cultural identity. An oft-repeated theme of Iran's heroic tales is vengeance for the unjust death of an Iranian king or warrior. This Zoroastrian understanding of vengeance is one element that shapes the Iranian perception and reaction to injustice.

The long-standing quarrel between the two major sects of Islam, Sunni (meaning the usual practice of Muhammad and his followers) and Shi'a (meaning followers of Ali), stems from the very beginning of the religion. Muhammad's familial line felt that the pious and simple life embodied the teaching of Muhammad. They felt that Hussein, the second son of Ali and grandson of Muhammad, stood in opposition to the growing wealth and power of the Arab elites. Hussein called for social justice and standing against the darkness of evil, represented in the Umayyad dynasty (661–750). A split between the Sunni and Shi'a Muslims can be traced to 632, just after Muhammad died. The question of who should succeed Muhammad, whether the most qualified person or only someone from the family line, was bitter from the beginning.

The newly formed religion of Muhammad exploded into the Persian Empire under the expansionist "rightly guided" caliph, Umar. At first the Arabs did not press the Persians to become Muslims, but eventually Iranian Persians adopted Islam to escape the poll tax (*jizyah*)[16] levied on non-Muslims (Forbis 1981, 31), which was used to subjugate non-Muslims based upon qur'anic surah 9:29. The Arabs were unable to Arabize the Persian Empire, however. Persian culture and its centers of learning led the Islamic Empire into its golden age (750–1258) (Mackey 1996, 41).

[16] The purpose of the jizyah is clearly understood by Muslims. For instance, the hadith Sahih Bukhari (see http://sunnah.com/bukhari/58) *lays out the condition for jizyah. An Islamic discussion thread on a blog site gives the reason of humiliation and lowliness to slowly convert non-Muslims to Islam; see* https://www.quora.com/Why-does-Allah-stipulate-Jizya-tax-from-non-Muslims-living-under-Islamic-rulers. *Egyptian-born author Bat Ye'or has written two books on this topic (1985, 1996).*

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Iranians eventually converted to Shi'ism as an integral part of Iranian identity; it not only spoke to Persian culture and the Iranian experience but warded off the threat of the Sunni Turks, who were expanding in the fifteenth century toward Iran. Shi'ism shares with Sunni Islam common beliefs in the oneness of God, the prophethood of Muhammad, and the resurrection. To these Shi'ite beliefs were added two others during the lifetime of Imam Jafar ibn Muhammad al-Sadiq (702–65):

1. *Adalah* (justice), meaning that men should strive to fulfill God's will in this world against Sunni injustice rather than wait for divine justice in the hereafter.
2. *Imamah* (imamate), meaning that the world needs the presence of an infallible guide who represents divine power and ought to be a descendant of Ali through his wife Fatimah (youngest daughter of Muhammad). (Taheri 2008, 24)

But it was not until 1490 that the thirteen-year-old Safavid Shah Ismail (1487–1524) converted everyone in Iran to Shi'a Islam "on pain of death" (Forbis 1981, 34). He "exploited the perception that Ali and Hussein were semi-detached from the Arab elite and effectively made them into virtual Iranians" (Bradley 2008, 7). Ismail did this by linking Hussein's marriage to Shahrbanou, the daughter of the last Iranian Sasanian king, Yazdegerd.

The life and death of Ali and the slaughter of Hussein on the day of Ashura are part of the metanarrative that has shaped the morality, values, and character of Shi'as, which also mirrors the national story of Iran (ibid., 8). The massacre at Karbala (a relatively minor civil war early on in Islamic history, in Iraq in 680AD) stands as a tragic moment when piety sacrificed itself for justice and is central to the Shi'as perception of Islamic history. Every year Shi'ites commemorate the slaughter of Hussein on Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram. Shi'ites re-enact the death by wounding themselves with knives, barbed chains, and swords while onlookers participate vicariously by pounding their chests rhythmically.

Sufism, or Mystical Islam

Orthodox Islam is not the only religious expression of spirituality in Iranian culture. The mystical expression of Sufism is entrenched in Islamic religious identity. There is a spectrum of folk Islamic practices, ranging from rejection of all forms of magic to overtly and consistently practicing magic.[17] Islam has in its various foundational documents the teaching of angels, demons, and jinn. Though many will deny using them when in fact they do, charms, amulets, fear of the evil eye, and using the Qur'an as an amulet to pass exams at school abound in daily life.

17 Love (2000) and Musk (1989) treat this subject in greater detail from a Christian perspective. Al-Ashqar (1998) gives a reasoned position from an Islamic perspective.

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A distinction needs to be made between official and popular religion.[18] Musk points out that official religion tends to deal with universal issues underlying ideas of origin, destiny, and the ultimate meaning of life. It finds its social expression in complex institutions and organizations. Popular religion tends to deal with problems of immediate, everyday life affected by the unseen world and destiny (Musk 1989, 198–99). Though the modern urbanite Muslim may not practice folk religion in his or her daily ritual, nonetheless this spirit worldview "is discovered in the hadith literature, in the folklore of local communities, and in myths of origin. It is visibly worked out in rites of passage and at times of crisis" (ibid., 204).

For example, my former neighbor, a secular Indian Muslim who has lived in the United States for twenty-five years, has had little to do with Islam. He is here to make money. But at the anniversary of his father's death, I was invited to their little family worship time, and for the first time I saw him do prayers. He practiced a ritual of burning a paper with qur'anic passages, mixing the ashes in a glass of water, and drinking the water to honor the dead parent. On another occasion, when their teenage son became involved in gangs, the grandmother wrote passages of the Qur'an on scraps of paper, soaked them in water, and had the son drink the water to get the Qur'an into him to change his behavior. At special events and during life crises, these now-urban, Western Muslims turn to what they were taught to do, which involves the unseen world of spirits and powers.

The spirit world and dreams play a particularly important role in the spiritual life of the Muslim.[19] For example, Sahih Bukhari 87:112 states, "A good dream (that comes true) of a righteous man is one of forty-six parts of prophetism," giving credence to the belief in the meanings hidden in dreams. There is a body of literature dedicated to better understanding this phenomenon. Table 2.1 is one example of the type of systemizing used by Sufis in interpreting their dreams.

18 Some writers on Islam divide the religious system into orthodox and folk Islam. It is my contention that what is called "folk" is an integral part of Islam.

19 The topic of dreams and their interpretation is found in the various collections of hadiths, such as Sahih Bukhari 87, "Interpretation of Dreams," with sixty-one hadiths on the subject; or in Sahih Muslim, with forty references to dreams in book 29, "The Book of Vision." Muslims find qur'anic support for three vehicles of revelation: dreams, oracles, and words (i.e., speech). The prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) received guidance in a dream (37:102); God spoke to Moses from the fire (27:8), which is an oracle; and the angel Gabriel spoke to Muhammad through words (2:97), or speech.

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