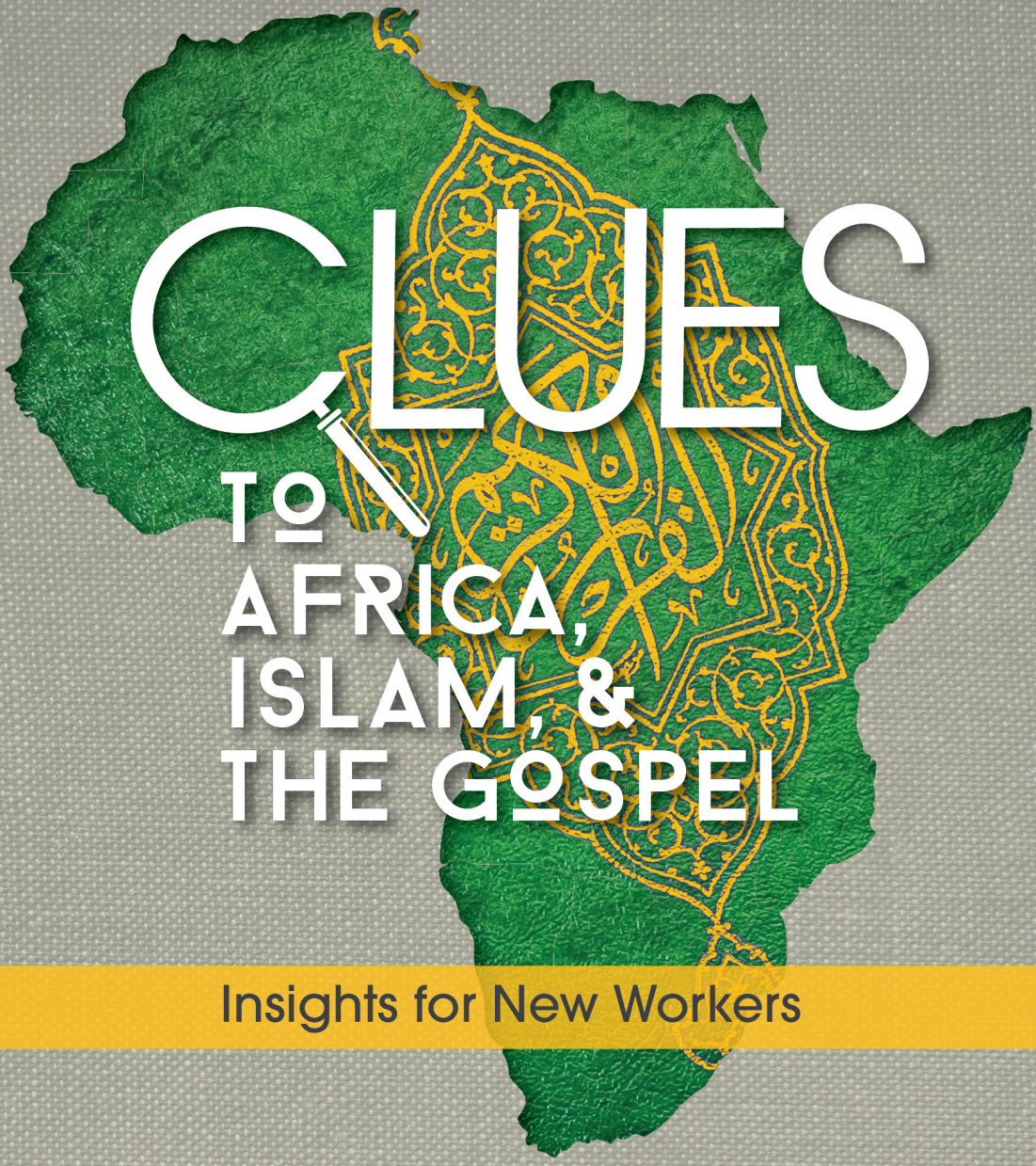


CLUES

TO AFRICA, ISLAM, & THE GOSPEL

Insights for New Workers

Colin Bearup

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Clues to Africa, Islam, and the Gospel: Insights for New Workers

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ISLAM PLUS AFRICA OR AFRICA PLUS ISLAM?

Pastor MC came to Christ in a prison. He had been raised among the Fula people of Guinea, a people proud of their role in bringing Islam to their region. The family recognised his abilities early on and set him apart to be trained as a Muslim cleric, a "marabout." He applied himself to the arts and sciences of local Islam and also learned to support himself as a tailor in the market. Why then did this smart, hardworking young man find himself in prison in a neighbouring country? You might like to pause for a moment and think what the three most likely reasons would be. And this is not a trick question. His religious training was a factor.

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No doubt many possible explanations suggest themselves, but few people guess the correct answer. First, MC was "abroad" only in the sense of living under a different secular government, but he was still very much among his own people. State borders are much less significant than ethnicity in what it means to be at home. Second, MC had been working as a sort of chaplain to a gang of thieves. His role, as a cleric, was to practice divination on behalf of the gang to determine the best and safest time to break in and steal. He provided them with Islamic charms to ward off the inevitable dangers faced by honest criminals.

One day the police raided MC's house and found stolen goods, and—long story short—he went to prison for five years. Looking back, many people ask him what he thought he was doing back then. How could a man like himself, trained in matters of religion, not know that stealing was wrong? MC shrugs and says that at the time it just seemed normal.

The important lesson we should learn from this story is not that all African Muslims are criminals or morally bankrupt. That is simply not true. The point is that our expectations mislead us. We easily assume we know how things work and how people think, and then we get surprised. The lines are drawn differently than what we would expect. If we are going to engage in transformational relationships with people, we need to understand them. To do that, we need to lay aside much of what we think we know and then commit to listening and learning.

Before we can start talking about Islam and Africa in the same sentence, we need to think about what each of those terms actually means. Islam is not just one thing. If we see it from afar, we may have a very simple idea of what we are talking about. In fact, even if we see it up close, our conditioning may deceive us into seeing less than it really is. Islam is many different things, and these things overlap to varying degrees. It is a complex reality. Our enthusiasm to simplify things for quicker understanding will not help us in the long term.

Islam is a religion, a set of beliefs and practices, and an expression of monotheism of global proportions. It is a shaper of culture, a community, and—for many—an identity. It is a way of life and a badge of honour. It is a legal and political system. It is a civilisation, rich in culture. It is a framework within which people negotiate the supernatural. It is a pathway on which people seek the true knowledge of God and of the soul. It is a patchwork of movements and associations. It is a historical reality expressed

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differently in different parts of the world. It is a spiritual stronghold. It is, and always has been, a political football, played with by men of power. All these descriptions are valid to some degree in any one place. Islam is many things at the same time, especially to those inside it.

It is not enough to think of Islam as a set of propositions. The core beliefs and practices are like the skeleton of a human body. On the street, you never meet skeletons; you meet living, breathing people. People do have a skeleton, but they also have muscles, fat, organs, sinews, circulation systems, skin, clothes, and—above all—life. Islam is incarnated in living communities of people, and it is with people that we deal, not with their bones.

Islam entered Africa from several different directions and in different ways. It then developed, and continues to develop, as it interacts with Africa. Many Arab and Western writers have taken Africa to be a blank canvas on which Islam, and then Christianity, came along and made their own designs. In fact, as Ghanaian missiologist John Azumah has so ably argued, Africa was and is the home of strong cultures and institutions that have shaped local expressions of both global religions.

Let's pick out some characteristics of African life that are relevant to its interaction with Islam. These are, inevitably, simple generalisations to be taken as clues to help us interpret what we find in any particular location. My only excuse in making such crude generalisations about Africans is that I shall do the same about Westerners from time to time. This is just to whet the appetite; it cannot possibly be a full analysis.

Some Characteristics of Traditional African Life

Belief in a creator God is universal. That does not mean that no African ever became an atheist, but belief in a creator God is normal. In African Traditional Religions, belief in the supreme being may not have been obvious to newly arrived missionaries, but it was present nonetheless, hidden behind a preoccupation with spirits of nature and the ancestors.

In traditional Africa, religion is inseparable from life. It is not a subject to be taught but a reality to be lived. Many African languages have no word for religion. What we have learned to distinguish as "religious matters" are, in Africa, just a normal part of the rich tapestry of existence, a set of threads that cannot be extracted from the whole. Ghanaian theologian Asamoah-

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Gyadu remarks in passing that "The African context is one in which religion serves as a survival strategy."[1]

Traditionally, religious practices are tied to specific communities and locations. People live as members of families, clans, and tribes. They inhabit places fashioned by humankind in the midst of natural features such as rivers, lakes, and hills. Traditional religious practice relates to all of these. If an individual is uprooted and finds himself living in a different African community, he does not take his practices with him but rather learns to fit in to the beliefs and practices associated with the new setting.

By way of illustration, I met an evangelical pastor who, finding himself as the only non-Muslim on a long-distance bus ride, joined in the Muslim prayers. As he spoke he was experiencing a conflict. It felt like the appropriate thing to do at the time, according to his instincts, but he knew perfectly well that it was inappropriate as a Christian pastor.

It follows that religious life and identity is not first and foremost a matter of individual conviction or a personal journey of discovery. Spiritual truth and the required responses are owned by the community and are not usually subject to the personal beliefs of individuals. When different religious worlds do collide, the whole rival community is evaluated, not just a set of ideas. The most significant decisions are made by group leaders, not by the individual.

In African life, the natural and the supernatural are not separated. They occupy the same space. They are part of one reality. This is true of animistic cultures elsewhere too, of course. Ancestors are not just remembered; they are present. Customs and rituals acknowledge their presence. Such customs do not call them back from somewhere else. Visible cause and effect are real, but invisible cause and effect are also real. So if you cut down a tree in such a way that someone is unintentionally injured, the visible process is not denied, but the unseen causes are also to be investigated. Likewise, if a poorly maintained car kills a cyclist, the issues to address are not simply technical or legal.

Traditional Africa is this-worldly, or as the scholar Spencer Trimingham put it, one-worldly. The living and the dead share the same world. Life on earth is not a prelude to life in another place. This is, of course,

1 In Gillian Mary Bediako, Benhardt Y. Quarshie, and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, eds., *Seeing New Facets of the Diamond: Christianity as a Universal Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 50.

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in marked contrast to both Islam and Christianity. Just because a new idea is embraced, that does not mean that all related attitudes automatically realign with the new idea.

African religion is not doctrinal. It is not verbally encoded. It is not taught through distinct verbal lessons. Western-style education has only relatively recently been established in Africa. Before that, in many places, various forms of Islamic education were present too. But that does not mean that a person's basic understanding of how spiritual life works is learned or passed on through these external expressions. People learn as much, if not more, from observing as they do from what is explicitly stated. If our business is communication of a message, we should take this into account. What does this mean for discipleship? We will pick up on this topic again later on.

In Africa, religion has traditionally been non-exclusive. It is not dogmatic. It is not threatened by the presence of someone else's religious practices. It expects different ethnicities to have different practices, because religious obligations are tied to identity and not to some absolute, universal truth. Africans have no reason to prevent or to oppose alternative ways of worship unless the alternatives threaten the social order as a whole.

By the same token, African religious practice is adaptable. If circumstances change, if a proven new reality emerges, the system need not collapse. It can accommodate innovation and can adapt to a significant degree. Africans are by tradition pragmatists. They do what works.

All these things reflect underlying values in African cultures. Islam in Africa often looks and feels different than Islam in other places precisely because the underlying culture is still there. The same is true, of course, for the Arab world, the Turkic world, and so on. It follows that a standard textbook on Islam will be of limited use. Such texts enable the reader to recognise the Muslim prayers and to anticipate the major festivals, but it will not tell you what those things mean to the people who practice them in any particular place. Being acquainted with the human skeleton is not the same as understanding how a living person ticks.

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