

Mazhar's does and I do not feel it is possible for us to ever fully comprehend all the nuances of the Arabic language, family, society and religion. In fact, labelling ourselves as Muslims and quoting the Qur'an would likely be perceived as deceptive and insulting.

God has clearly gifted and called Mazhar to minister among the Arab people. Chandler's book captures a taste of Mazhar's enthusiasm for life, literature and

the Lord Jesus. It also describes Mazhar's passion for seeing the Bible distributed and accessible in all parts of the Arab world. Some have questioned his understanding of systematic theology but that misses the point of a man who is known for his generosity, hospitality and keen insight into the lives of those around him. I personally count Mazhar as one of my close friends and whole-heartedly recommend *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road*.

A MIDDLE EASTERN BMB RESPONDS TO CHANDLER'S BOOK

by Mostafa S.

Soon after he became a Christian 28 years ago, Mostafa became active in outreach to Muslims in his Middle Eastern country, and he and his wife have provided shelter and discipleship training for countless Believers from Muslim Background (BMBs). He has suffered much for his faith and is a tireless evangelist and teacher, known and respected across the Arab world. At the request of his church leaders in the Middle East, he and his family moved to Europe some ten years ago, from where they minister locally and internationally in evangelism, discipleship and teaching.

I. Reviewing this book from a BMB perspective

I am honoured to be asked to share my thoughts about the book *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road*. This book explores the very rich life of my brother in Christ, Mazhar Mallouhi, the Muslim who converted to Christ so many years ago now. Coming from a Muslim background myself, I can say that Mazhar was one of the signs on the road for me, as well as for many other converts, when I started my journey with Christ some twenty-eight years ago. At that time, the number of converts who were well known in the Arab world was very small, and the idea of changing one's faith from Islam to Christianity was nearly unheard of in our countries and among our communities in the Middle East.

Mazhar Mallouhi is one of those people who can establish and strengthen his relationships with others smoothly. He has

very strong charisma that helps him to be accepted and welcomed by people from other faiths. What made me very sad is that on the very day that I was going to spend the whole day with Mazhar and some other converts, the security police in my country arrested me and put me in prison for about eleven months. Thus, I have still not had the privilege of meeting Mazhar personally.

Nevertheless, I have read most of his books and have even published comments about his book *An Eastern Reading of the Gospel of Luke* (a special edition of the Gospel of Luke published through Mazhar's publishing company). In that review, I raised some questions about what the Muslim Moroccan professor wrote in his introduction to *An Eastern Reading*. In the introduction, he claimed that he owns an authentic or a genuine copy of the Gospel of Luke! Even stranger, at the end of his nice introduction, he

wrote 'In the Beginning was the Word' but he wrote it in its feminine way in Arabic (rather than the masculine way it is written in the Gospel of John). In that review I asked why Mazhar hadn't used this golden chance to explain his faith to his Muslim friend before he published the book. I still hope to meet with my brother Mazhar one day, God willing.

Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road covers a long period of time in Mazhar's life and ministry, and that makes it difficult for me to comment about many things, especially since in our countries religion is mixed with politics. As we used to say, 'Our policies change every five years depending on the direction of the wind.' That is why it does not feel fair for me to agree or disagree with what I read in this book.

Let me begin by sharing something about my values as a believer from a Muslim background, or BMB (I prefer this term to the term MBB because I no longer consider myself a Muslim):

- I am not a liberal Christian. I follow what the Bible says, but I also understand that the Bible was written using different languages over a long period of time.
- I am opposed to being *without roots*, and that helps me to connect easily to my culture, language and family, as well as to the existing Christian churches in my culture.
- I am very keen that we learn from each other, and encourage each other at the same time.
- I strongly agree that it is essential to have a clear identity in my life.
- I am not *against* Muslims, as they are my family and I love them as Jesus loves them. But I am strongly against Islam as a faith system.

2. Unhelpful and inaccurate 'facts' and interpretations in the book

In his book, Chandler talks about many things in our countries; some are good and insightful, and while some are neither accurate nor helpful. I must mention some statements in the book with which I strongly disagree, and I pray that God will help me to be clear and transparent as much as I can without offending anyone. As we all know, in life we see things from different angles, and this is the source of major disagreements between many Muslims and Christians, too. Chandler did his best to explore and introduce Mazhar's background but I can say that he misses some very significant aspects of what is a very different culture.

Chandler made many mistakes that I found disturbing and that caused me considerable concern. A number of times he either criticized or praised individuals because of something in their *cultural* lifestyle, to which he gave a *religious* meaning. For example, when talking about the Bishop of Galilee, he praised him because he could trace his family roots back to the time of Pentecost. Is that a cultural or a religious matter? What is the value of praising someone simply because he can trace his roots back two thousand years? Does that devalue other people who cannot trace such a long ancestry? If Mazhar were to trace his roots, I would not be surprised if he found his roots go back to one of the disciples of Christ, long before anyone from his family converted to Islam during the time of the second Khalif, Omar Ibn El-Khattab, who subdued the people of Egypt and Syria and forced them to convert unwillingly so as to save their lives and avoid paying the Islamic *Jezia* (Islamic tax). My mother used to say that her roots went back to the Prophet, but the significance of all such pride in one's ancestry collapsed dramatically when I

joined another family – the family of those who know Jesus Christ personally.

In the beginning of the fourth chapter, Chandler mentioned the Crusades. I do not really understand why we insist on falling into one of the most well-known traps that Muslims use against us! And why should we talk about the Crusades only from the Muslim point of view? Why must we confuse religion and politics as Muslims have the habit of doing? Why does Chandler mention what is happening in Iraq, Afghanistan and in Sudan? Are Christians responsible for such violence and suffering? Are Christians responsible for what is happening in Darfur in West Sudan? Are Christians responsible for suicide bombers in Iraq, Palestine and Israel? I do not think so. I strongly disagree with Chandler. These incidents of violence motivated by Islamic ideology cannot be blamed on Christians!

On page 74 Chandler criticizes Christians who go on prayer walks through Muslim countries trying to 'reclaim the land'. I want Chandler to tell me what the difference is, in his understanding, between such language coming from Christians, and that which comes from Muslims who claim Spain back as a Muslim land that is now under *infidel control*. I understand, and Muslims scholars agree, that the believer (Muslim) who talks about infidel ideas is not an infidel himself, but I would very much like it if Chandler would be careful in what he writes, so as not to support the other side. In any case, the expression 'reclaim the land', when used by evangelical Christians, has never caused any problem for me or for any other convert friends because we understand that it is meant in a spiritual and not a political sense. So, I want to reassure Chandler that his

concerns about the harm done by this 'militant' language are misplaced.

3. Issues of identity for BMBs

Mazhar talks on many occasions about the issues surrounding the change in identity as a Muslim comes to Christ, and I agree with him that we must keep our identity without compromising our new faith. We never read in the Bible anything about neglecting or ignoring our families. I've never seen anything that asks me to attack my family. In contrast, it is very clear that Islam is attacking the Christian faith all the way and we can see that clearly in all who convert to Islam. Islam has tried to annul or destroy everything about Christianity and Judaism, ever since the time just before Muhammad's death when he asked his followers to kick all Christians and Jews out of the Arabian Peninsula. Muhammad never thought about his own children's uncles who were originally Christians (Khadija the first wife of Muhammad was a Christian lady), and we never hear about them as part of his children's relatives. I ask you, Chandler, why did Muhammad change his own children's identity without consulting them?

In pages 101-102, Chandler recounts the story that Mazhar frequently tells about the monkey that is frantically pulling fish out of a pond in order to save them from drowning. Chandler says that Mazhar teaches that Christians do the same thing when they try to 'rescue' followers of Christ from Muslim backgrounds by taking them out of their Muslim environment. It is a funny story, but I cannot really understand the connection between the monkey and converts who decide to separate *themselves* from their communities.

He also refers to the Arabic proverb which says, 'Don't tell me who you are, tell

me who your friends are' (p. 102). I can say proudly that since I became a Christian, I have tons of very good and valuable Christian friends. I have no problem with my identity since I became a Christian. Do you know why? Because the one who personally gave me my new identity is the Holy Spirit himself. Can you imagine? Let me tell you how it actually works. When we choose Jesus, we try to keep our relationships with our families as much as we can, but God at the same time does something new and different. He replaces my human family with another family, a spiritual family. In the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, we hear this from the mouth of Jesus Christ himself.

Seeking to continue to live inside the Muslim family structure is commendable, but it also tends to weaken my new Christian identity. When I try to do that, I end up living as an alien; I am neither a Muslim nor a Christian. Trying to keep the old identity makes you lose both identities. I will need to compromise or sacrifice something very important. *Islam never provides a personal identity like the one Jesus Christ gives.* Islam provides a murky and nationalistic identity that does not bring about any good, even though we have searched for its value for years! This is the challenge of living as a Christian, to have one's own, *personal* identity in Christ, even if you live alone without being in a community or *Umma* (nation).

When the Tunisian Muslim convert scholar in North Africa (p. 117) says that there is no contradiction in being a follower of Christ *and* a Muslim scholar, I can say here that we are facing one of two possibilities. Either he has a lack of Christian

teaching and we need to help him to understand more accurately so that he can enjoy his life with his Saviour more, or we have to agree that he is living in a temporary period in which a new community of converts is being established that is living and increasing *underground* until the time comes when they will finally be able to share about their new faith openly in their communities. One cannot remain a *Muslim* scholar for long as a follower of Christ.

The Good News these days is that the number of converts is increasing hugely, and the number of workers is increasing, too – especially in our countries that have faced Islamic pressure and oppressions for fourteen centuries. When a Muslim receives

Jesus as personal Saviour now, he finds lots of new members in his new spiritual family. Mazhar Mallouhi was unfortunate in starting his personal journey with Christ early, before the new movement in the Middle East and other Arab countries had begun. That is why we really appreciate his personal

experience through the years, but he needs also to appreciate other people's experiences in light of the new situation in our part of the world.

4. Where is this kind of dialogue leading?

Islam has attacked Christianity through the centuries. Islam converted more than a thousand churches into mosques in the Islamic world in the beginning of the Muslim era. Islam took over the most holy place of the Jews and changed it into three very important mosques in Jerusalem. Who attacked whom? Is that a difficult question to answer?

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I very much like the idea of building on the dark side of the moon as he expresses it on page 87, but I do not agree with the idea of a *Christian West* and a *Muslim East*. The East is Christian too, and has been since the beginning of Christianity. Furthermore, we cannot build bridges from one side only. We need to build strong foundations on both sides first, and then we can meet in the middle like with any other kind of negotiations. I cannot build relationships with Muslims by building on Islamic foundations only, and then later try to introduce Jesus to them.

Finally, Chandler shares in his book about the many personal situations where Mazhar has succeeded in sharing with Muslim friends about Jesus (p. 96). That helps us to learn how to share our faith and how to pray, too. However, I was very

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seriously concerned about what he said about the ongoing friendly dialogue between Dr. Zaki Badawi, the Muslim British cleric, and Dr. Carey. We need to discuss this matter with honesty and frankness. Does that dialogue bring any Islamic agreement that the Christian faith is not corrupted? That the Holy Bible is not changed? That Jesus was crucified? Can they do that kind of dialogue in the Arab world, too? Do the frequent regular articles in the London Times lead to anything more than the request that has been raised by Dr. Rowan Williams, Dr. Carey's successor, that Shari'a Law be adopted for Muslims in Britain? Does that dialogue open the door for *British Muslims* who live in Britain to be free to change their faith and live in peace in Britain? Many questions need to be answered!