



I appreciated your insightful comment, 'It's that tendency of religion to demarcate boundaries, to insist on symbols of inclusion and exclusion so that church membership becomes more a wall than a door for the Muslim seeking Christ... The form of witness is (Mazhar's) priority and calling, not the form of the church.'³ Mazhar's life gives us the opportunity to join a modern-day Middle Easterner in the practice of building on the common heritage the Christian faith shares with Islam. By removing Western cultural and religious trappings associated with Christ in the minds of Muslims, we are forced to re-examine the

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Following Christ, who chose to walk the dusty roads of Palestine, should not be seen as a new model for mission, but rather an intimate, passionate calling from the heart of our Creator. God's Spirit works individually and creatively and knows no bounds. Although I have spent most of my life among Muslims, no one has stretched my own thinking and given me a glimpse of Christ more than Mazhar has done, who, in spite of – or maybe because of – his very earthy, human qualities, continually points me towards his Master.

JESUS OUTSIDE OF THE BOX: A RESPONSE TO BRAD GILL'S REVIEW

by Leith Gray

Leith Gray has lived and worked in West Asia since the late 1980s. He and his wife Andrea work in Bible translation and consultation and are involved in training local and cross-cultural workers to present the message of the Bible creatively and incarnationally in local contexts. They particularly enjoy partnering with colleagues from a Muslim background as they seek to make the message of the Bible clear and relevant to local people. Andrea and Leith have two young children.

I am glad to be able to respond to Brad Gill's review of *Pilgrims of Christ*, since he, like me, knows Mazhar personally and is captivated by the person behind Chandler's literary portrait. I think Brad shows quite well in his review that the reality of Mazhar is too complicated to be captured by any book!

Brad's opening words jumped out at me, when he spoke of the *nasty borderlands* between Christianity and Islam. I began to reflect: Are these borderlands really so nasty? Or is their ugliness in the eye of the

beholder? It is a striking thing in the biblical account of Jesus that the borderlands are exactly where he chose to live and work. Yes, he chose to dwell in the boundary between pious and 'sinner', between Jew and Samaritan, between Jew and Gentile. Even more threatening, he chose to cross the boundary between clean and unclean, belief and unbelief, even life and death!

The challenge of the borders that Brad mentions is that for the most part they are entirely human constructions that are often



confused with divine truth. When we see the needless suffering Mazhar and other Arab brothers face as a result of the sanctification of human categories, we are forced to confront a problem – not just in our methods of outreach, but ultimately in our whole perspective on the message of Jesus. I agree with Brad that through the example of successful insider believers like Mazhar, we can see the inadequacy of our mental models. In fact, we can see in Mazhar's life story the failing in the traditional evangelistic model of proclaiming the message of Jesus to Arabs in a way that is often not liveable over the long term nor reproducible.

We often say that all that Muslims (or anyone else, for that matter) really need is Jesus, but in practice our methods betray that slogan. For once a Muslim starts to become really interested in the message of Jesus, he or she is directly or indirectly taught to abandon cultural practices that are totally compatible with the gospel, and to adopt in their place foreign cultural practices and boundary markers of minority Christians, practices that are merely human and not part of the gospel message. Gradually the person is alienated from his or her family and even rejected. Mazhar often tells anecdotes and stories of some of these failures and concludes with the moral: *the system is corrupt*.

Usually our response to this ugly reality is to try harder, look for better methods, or even blame the recipients of the message for their hard hearts. How often have we heard the words that fall like a guillotine, 'They just don't have the Holy Spirit'? These are simply cop-outs and mental escapes to let us avoid

the key point – the Scripture says that the message of Christ is the 'power of God for the salvation of those who believe', but for hundreds of years in the Muslim world, traditional *conflict-of-religions* approaches to evangelism have been, at best, powerless in transforming Muslim societies into the image of Christ, and at worst, destructive of Middle Eastern families, culture and civilization. Mazhar often tells the story in this regard about the monkey by the side of the river scooping up fish from the current and laying them on the river bank *in order to save them* from drowning.

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This failure in Western missions is not news to missiologists and many field practitioners. Their experiences and the facts on the ground have led them to look for another way of understanding the message of Jesus and how it should be proclaimed. Lamin Sanneh, in his 2008 book *Disciples of All Nations*, highlights

two early critics of the cultural transfer model of missions, Fr. Vincent Donovan and Roland Allen. Allen, a thinker writing in the 1920s, strongly criticized what he called the 'Western cultural captivity of the Gospel'. He saw that the baggage of the European civilizing mission essentially wrapped up the Jesus of the Bible in layers that were impenetrable by all but the most persistent seekers, and that kept the gospel from performing its true work as the transforming leaven of all societies and people groups.

Paul Hiebert wrote in 1994 about how we might define Christianity, the nature of conversion and the relationship between religions. He noted that contemporary mathematical theory shows us that there are several ways in which we can define a

set. He focuses on the distinction between *bounded* sets and *centred* sets. Westerners have operated for generations under the *bounded* set model, a model that assumes that Jesus started a new religion called Christianity, the only true religion in the world. It is a system that, as Brad says, 'demarcate(s) boundaries... insist(s) on symbols of inclusion and exclusion so that church membership becomes more a wall than a door... ' The bounded set model forces us to believe that truth only exists within that bounded set, meaning within the boundaries of Christianity – or even within a particular denomination! We are led to believe, therefore, that we have 100 per cent of the truth, and those outside our group have zero per cent of the truth! As Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, writes in the April edition of *Christianity Today*, such a view portrays God as a stingy God, parcelling out truth only to a few.

When we put things in those terms, we realize how untenable this position is. Those in the West who are part of the *emergent church* movement have reacted to this traditional stance, one they perceive as arrogant and derived from the influence of modernist thought on Christians. They observe that no one has 100 percent of the truth... apart from God! So at best, we can say that perhaps those within the boundaries of Christianity have 90 per cent of the truth, but it would be more modest and defensible to say we have 70 or 60 per cent of the truth. We still haven't arrived. What about those outside the boundaries? Do we dare to say that they have as little as 10 per cent of the truth? Isn't it more likely that they have something like 30 or 40 per cent or more?

Theologians have categorized knowledge into two general categories: general

revelation and special revelation. Our Muslim friends possess as much knowledge from general revelation as Christians do. In addition, they often have a large amount of knowledge based indirectly on special revelation: they believe in the one Creator God, his books, his prophets, the concept of sin, reward, and so on. Perhaps the 'brazen translation strategy [of] carefully listening to the perspectives and questions of Sufi Muslim scholars and respected Muslim literati' is not so brazen, but a natural and godly way to go about things.

When we operate under the old *bounded set* or *conflict of religions* paradigm, we are tempted to portray the other as evil, and ourselves on the side of virtue. Nobel laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn said that the experience of suffering in Soviet Gulags helped him see reality: the line between good and evil in the world does not fall between civilizations, nor between peoples, or even individuals... it falls down the centre of every human heart!

Let me move on to another major point that Brad Gill derives from Chandler's story, *the need for integrity in the message and the messenger*. In recent years, there has been concern among some prominent evangelicals about how evangelicals are viewed by people outside of the evangelical subculture. Kinnaman and Lyons, in their recently published book *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... and Why it Matters* go into embarrassing detail in this regard.

Richard Mouw writes about the need for an 'open-handed gospel' when we encounter those of other faiths or no faith. Mouw notes how many evangelicals today feel that salvation is closely tied to 'doctrinal clarity', and he decries the 'stingy spirit' that refuses to recognize the good,

the true and the beautiful in others. My wife has often noted in a similar vein that evangelicals have moved from a doctrine of *justification by faith* to a position of *justification by doctrinal statement*. This focus on doctrine to the neglect of integrity of character often leads to the worst kinds of hypocrisy and posturing, with evangelism no more than a form of propaganda intended to win nominal allegiance.

Part of Mazhar's genius is his artistry in presenting the message of Christ in a way that maintains the dignity of those listening, rejecting 'all shameful and underhanded methods' (2 Corinthians 4:2, NLT). Mazhar has excelled at utilizing Jesus' very Eastern methods of presenting truth, allowing listeners the freedom to respond or to go their own way.

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One way we could describe this is that Mazhar downplays logic, preferring to speak by analogy. He prefers parabolic discourse to the direct and embarrassingly blunt styles promoted by some evangelists.

To return to the image of borderlands, perhaps what is most challenging about

Mazhar is that he lives, not by making brief forays from the safe centre to the dangerous periphery of Christendom and then back again; rather, he lives out the approach Vincent Donovan took when he said, 'do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you

are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before.'

YOU CAN JUDGE PARENTS BY THEIR CHILDREN

by *Abu Dawood*

Abu Dawood, along with his wife and children, has lived and ministered among Gulf Arab Muslims for over fifteen years. He teaches at a higher education institution and serves on a team that seeks to befriend Muslims, minister to those seeking God, disciple believers, and, by God's grace, establish indigenous churches.

In 1996, we first met Mazhar Mallouhi while serving on a multi-agency team in the Gulf. A few of our team members had previously known Mazhar in Egypt and had shared with us tales of his exploits, stories and love of practical jokes. Personally, I did not know what to expect of the man and I remember being quite nervous the first time we hosted him and Christine, his wife, for an evening meal.

During that first encounter, I remember Mazhar not saying too much and I wondered if the tales were deserved. That

is, until our daughter, who was two at the time, came and gave him a hug. The two began to play together and I saw Mazhar melt from being distant and reserved to laughing out loud and tickling our screaming toddler. Mazhar then smiled and said, 'You can judge the parents by the children,' and since then we have become good friends and colleagues who have worked together to fund several translation projects.

In *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road*, Paul-Gordon Chandler summarizes the life and attitudes of Mazhar. I write attitudes