

PART 2: PILGRIMS OF CHRIST ON THE MUSLIM ROAD A VARIETY OF VIEWPOINTS

REIMAGINING THE WAY OF CHRIST WITHIN DAR ISLAM

by Brad Gill

Brad has been in ministry to Muslims since the 1980s, twelve years of which were in North Africa where he and his wife Beth worked closely with Mazhar and Christine. He now lives close to the Muslim concentration in Detroit and is involved in mission education and training as a representative of the U.S. Center for World Mission.

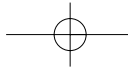
The nasty borderland between Muslim and Christian worlds was bound to generate pilgrims who seem to transcend both. The extraordinary journey and ministry of Mazhar Mallouhi, portrayed in Paul-Gordon Chandler's *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road*, is the story of such a pilgrim. He joins many other *irregulars* who have negotiated other cultural divides across the global mission movement, those precocious nationals whose lives seem to find another way through the morass of tangled misunderstandings. It always seems messy and downright disturbing, for the message of these pilgrims is often as prophetic as it is apostolic. These *irregulars* force us to pry open our missionary models and re-examine them, creating a haunting ambiguity which tempts us to simply tighten the lid back down on what we are used to. Mazhar's bold behaviour and sharp responses always seemed to challenge my way of interacting with Muslims. Looking back through the lens of Chandler's book, I can see that the force of this man's life always moved in the direction of mission *reformation* – of cultural readjustment of the

Christian presence among Muslims.

We really owe Paul-Gordon Chandler a note of thanks for going the distance with our friend's story. It is much more than a biography – more an exposition on a life and ministry. (At times one wonders where Mazhar's thoughts end and the author's begin, but Chandler's challenge is to not only exegete a man's life, but to exposit ministry principles just as Mazhar would do with any of us Western missionaries.) I hope this book represents only the first of a new genre that will

ground our missiological discussion in the reality of historical experience. We Westerners in Muslim domains have always had the tendency to drift towards abstraction and theoretical debate, as if we are going to discover some universal that we can apply to reaching all Muslims with the gospel. By taking a biographical approach, Chandler roots his discussion of principles in a particular soil, in particular historical and cultural conditions and in a particular life and personality. This frees us from our propensity for method and allows us to learn from one *modus vivendi* of ministry to Muslims in our present day.

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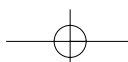
In the first part of the book, Chandler sketches Mazhar's biography as his text for the more expository chapters that follow. The push-and-pull of Mazhar's life moves through changing generations of Arab *zeitgeist* and across a wide range of Muslim settings. Depicting the different sides of this man was no small challenge, a man who seems to be a cosmopolitan, a tribal and/or a mystic all rolled into one. Even after a decade of ministry with Mazhar, my own understanding of his story remained piecemeal, anecdotal and incoherent, so Chandler's portrayal of the man has made me more appreciative of what has fuelled his *cultural instinct* in ministry to Muslims. At times when I was with him, Mazhar would seem reactionary about something I just could not grasp, either intellectually or emotionally. But this deeper look into his life reveals that these were instinctive reflexes built on earlier cultural dislocation and insult. Those who have been involved in ministering to Muslims know how torturous it can be for a Muslim to negotiate the religious force field between Islam and Christianity as he comes to Christ. It can colour his entire perspective and orientation in the future. Chandler has made sure we know from the outset just how Mazhar's experience has birthed a deep and culturally intuitive ministry to Muslims.

The author has chosen to call Mazhar a *pilgrim*, a *pilgrim of Allah*, a *pilgrim of Christ on the Muslim Road*, focusing our attention on a *core image* very familiar to both Muslim and Christian traditions. Chandler describes how Mazhar first saw Christ in the *irregular channel* of Mahatma Gandhi, and how Mazhar has drunk deeply from the writings of the missionary who knew Gandhi best, E.

Stanley Jones. It is Jones' book, *Christ on the Indian Road*, that frames Chandler's thinking on Mazhar's pilgrimage to Christ, a pilgrimage *naturally filled with paradox*, provocatively unconventional and very unorthodox. It's a *core image* that Mazhar has claimed for his own Christian identity amidst Muslims of the world. Pilgrims journey, often together, alongside each other, in helpful and supportive companionship. The image promotes a convivial attitude, a posture of sharing, reciprocity and partnership. It's a metaphor that pervades all the succeeding chapters as Chandler expounds on Mazhar's insightful way of *bridging* into Muslim lives with the love of Christ.

Chandler employs another core image, that of the guest, in articulating Mazhar's subtle negotiation of the poisoned Muslim-Christian divide. In the section 'Bridging Two Worlds', Chandler shows how Mazhar distils this vital metaphor from years of exile, confusion, misunderstanding, confrontation, resentment, hatred and abuse. The guest can bring a surprising 'Salaam on Islam', reflecting all the Arab value of hospitality, of honour and generosity, of respect and reciprocity. It guides his thoughts and guards his attitudes when confronting the religious predisposition of Muslims. 'Our openness to all we stand for,' he says, 'opens them to all we stand for' (p. 96). As a guest, Mazhar chooses to identify with the person of Christ but *relativizes* his relationship with Christianity. For him Christ and Christianity are not the same thing. 'Christ never intended to establish a new religion,' he says, 'but instead came to simply establish his life in and among us.' Chandler makes it clear

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how uninterested Mazhar is in *engaging religion*. Religion more often seems to isolate and depersonalize others, violating the hospitable Spirit of Christ. He never wants to see people as just products of their religion, but persons on a pilgrimage to God. Chandler illustrates over a whole chapter just how Mazhar tactfully and respectfully evades the incessant religious comparisons of Islam and Christianity by finding common themes that surround the person of Christ.

One might get a bit uncomfortable with Mazhar's idea that a guest actually learns any truth from Muslims in this open and personal exchange. What happens with real theological

contradictions in all of this relational openness? Chandler makes it very clear that Mazhar has evolved toward a more generous view of Islam and that being a guest 'requires that we take a more positive view of Muhammad and all that he was attempting to do.' Mazhar seems able to mute the theological dissonance in his interaction with Muslims, often turning these points of tension

back on the Muslim for further spiritual quest and reflection. Chandler's long interview with Mazhar at the end of the book clarifies how this pilgrim on the Muslim Road has reconciled theological ambiguities and conflicts. When asked about the Trinity, he says, 'I don't understand it, but I live with my Master, with my Father, and God's Spirit, and that is the reality to me... having a "form" for this is not a necessity for me' (p. 177). For Mazhar it's the person of Christ that is attractive to Muslims, especially as he is seen through the love of Christians. While Mazhar is comfortable with using the Qur'an in his interaction with Muslims, he believes that

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love is the bridge to truth, not Islam. Chandler illuminates how the Arab cultural instinct in Mazhar minimizes the need for logical resolution over against the consistent love of a fellow pilgrim who is discovering God through open and humble relationships.

Pilgrims on the Muslim road earlier or later must resolve their identity between these two religious worlds, and Chandler has synthesized Mazhar's perspective on cultural identity in the chapter, 'The Muslim Disciple of Christ'. Again, Mazhar's biography grounds us in the painful and almost crushing journey this can be for a disciple of Christ. His initial *radical discontinuity* from the Muslim world

has many typical earmarks of a Muslim coming to Christ as 'inwardly he was attempting to process the identity issue'. It's because of his early experience of conversion *into Christianity* and the succeeding years of restoration to Muslim culture that Mazhar takes issue with our understanding of religious boundaries. His sympathies are that any young Muslim coming to Christ doesn't need to

'unravel the intimate fibres of his being', that he or she is *in process*, moving 'not out of Islam but towards Christ'. Chandler is able to illustrate the numerous pathologies of identity faced in the conversion of a Muslim through the lens of Mazhar's story.

The author has also chosen to call this pilgrim an *insider*, meaning, I assume, that after negotiating the religious borderland, he now lives, moves and has his being in the Islamic world. This biography is a remarkable study on this idea of an insider among Muslims. Mazhar is no *pure insider* (anthropologically speaking). Over the whole book Chandler describes the

development of Mazhar's attitude and relation to Islam over a lifetime as a journey *from family, to foe, to friend*. Chandler has interviewed numerous friends and mentors in Mazhar's life, both Muslim and Christian, to render this assessment of *insider*. But, frankly, the term seems too static a term of identity when compared to a more dynamic life experience. One is impressed with the process, the *pilgrim's progress*, you might say, of negotiating social, religious and political realities on the border of Islam and Christianity. Many of us teared up a bit when news came that after four decades Mazhar had finally been able to go home to his family in Syria. This experience crowned years of 'homelessness' and a consistent desire to reconcile misunderstanding and ostracism. His life has all the characteristics of one who brokers the status of *Christian* within the Arab-Muslim world, and Chandler makes it very clear that it was the evolution of Mazhar's attitude that made the difference.

Chandler's study is, indeed, a helpful periscope on the semantic reach of this term *insider*. The concentric circles of family, ethnicity, country, Arab-Muslim society and Dar Islam could all be referenced in answering the question, 'Inside what?' Inside a religion, a religious denomination, a mosque, a cultural tradition, a tribal society, pan-Arab society, a family? Mazhar is a particular type of insider who has diligently, at great personal expense, crafted his place in Arab-Muslim society. He's a writer who circulates well in the cosmopolitan Middle East and North Africa, whose personal and professional concerns echo many of the aspirations of Arab nationalism from a prior century. His persona is a magnetic blend of

tribal and modern Arab virtues, a blend wonderfully received by the many Muslim friends Chandler quotes throughout the book. But through the years the stigma of *Christian* has made Mazhar automatically an outsider who has diligently sought to restore an original status. Chandler has had a tendency to conflate terms like Arab, *Muslim* and *Eastern*, but he has done a commendable job of grounding the sloppy term *insider* in this particular pilgrim's story.

Chandler shows how Mazhar's restoration as an insider came as Mazhar chose to associate himself as a 'Sufi' within

Dar Islam. Chandler has built the spiritual basis for Mazhar's choice throughout the book, from the impact of Gandhi's spirituality, through his discomfort with religious institutionalism, to his desire to recover a more Eastern spirituality in all of his projects as a writer. Mazhar feels comfortable as a mystic, but anyone who has known this man has to smile at any idea of him being a reclusive ascetic. This is one big and bold personality fitting into a broad spiritual stream within Islam. It gives him that unorthodox foothold within Dar Islam. The Sufi movements have always been heterodox and through the centuries, they have at times been persecuted as anathema to the law of Islam. The Sufis often are more sympathetic to Christ, more intent on personal union with God, than they are on legislating any religious code of conduct, so Mazhar's eccentric embrace of Christ, even his refusal to ascribe to the *shahada*, can tactfully reside inside Islamic heterodoxy. From page one, Chandler has very skilfully constructed a rationale for *insider* from the particular ingredients of this man's background, personality and vocation.

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friend.

The final section, 'New Directions for the Journey', makes clear that being an insider is not just for the personal, social or cultural equilibrium of the pilgrim of Christ. Its primary impulse in Mazhar's life is to bring Jesus to the Muslim in a more effective communication of the gospel.

Chandler makes explicit in these chapters Mazhar's concern to *Easternize* Jesus, the Bible and the Christian style of communication so that Muslims can feel that Jesus belongs inside their world. It's the *Western Jesus* that Mazhar believes to be the *great contradiction* that keeps Muslims from Christ. All

other theological contradictions between Islam and Christianity seem to pale by comparison to this tragic confusion of Christ's identity with the West. Chandler has been quite candid as to how Mazhar profiles the religious syncretism of Western Christianity. His broad generalizations of evangelical Christianity are uncomfortable and at times inappropriate, but one appreciates that Chandler is 'letting it roll' so that we might absorb the stigma Muslims assign to a Jesus shrouded in Western-Christian stereotypes.

Mazhar has staked the last decades of his ministry on correcting this apparent contradiction in the minds of Muslims, publishing a set of new biblical translations and commentaries more sympathetic to Muslim questions and reaction. His new titles *The Sufi Reading of the Gospel of John* or *An Eastern Reading of the Gospel of Luke* are clear declarations of his mission strategy. He employs a brazen translation strategy by carefully listening to the perspectives and questions of Sufi Muslim scholars and

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respected Muslim literati. Here again we witness the companionship and reciprocity of a *pilgrim-guest* whose posture within Muslim society generates new insights for correcting the distorted image of Christ. To hear a Sufi scholar say these texts are theologically 'a source of rich inspiration and enlightenment', or to hear another say that they help bring understanding to the term *Son of God*, makes one a cheerleader for this approach. Chandler recognizes that it can offend certain Christians who feel the threat of compromise. Admittedly, it tends to contextualize Jesus in Sufi clothes, favouring an ideal,

ephemeral, mystic Jesus whose beauty transcends all the dogmatic exchange. One could say this is only one possible synthesis of the gospel from Eastern, Arab and/or Muslim values. But behind the particular *result* of Mazhar's Sufi orientation to Christ, Chandler has illumined the creative *process* Mazhar has used to contextualize Jesus and the scriptures. Yes, the actual face of Christ could vary across the manifold levels of Muslim society, but Chandler has more importantly revealed Mazhar's intrepid partnering with Muslim friends to both dispel Westernizations and present a biblically *relevant* Middle Eastern Christ. This process provokes us to ask *just how often we come with the answers* before we understand the spiritual yearning of a Muslim heart. Chandler gives example after example of how false notions of Christ that stubbornly cloud a Muslim mind are addressed in Mazhar's publication of a more Easternized Christ.

Finally, I believe the arc of Chandler's story presents a two-fold challenge to the person in ministry to Muslims. Both are a

response to the particular dynamics of Muslim-Christian encounter, to the mutual predisposition of two embattled and dogmatic monotheisms, and to the *religious mindedness* that so easily pervades their frontier. *First, there must be integrity to the message and the messenger.* From the inception of the book Chandler wants us to confront the powerful *soul force* of a Hindu Gandhi in the life of this lost and disgruntled Arab-Muslim. The incarnation of the different Arab values of hospitality, generosity and honour is not sufficient. Chandler wants us to hear Mazhar's plea for spiritual integrity. Chandler is not pushing us to imitate the bold life of this *excommunicated-but-now-restored-insider*. Rather he gives a prophetic call for what made all the difference in Mazhar's attraction to Christ: spiritual lives that walk their talk and display a spiritual *reality* amidst the all-too-stale religiosity of Muslim-Christian encounter. 'A rose,' he says, 'doesn't have to propagate its perfume.' The antidote to religious hypocrisy is a true Christ-likeness. Just as recent surveys seem to confirm, the love of Christians is the great attention-getter for Muslims. Mazhar saw this spiritual integrity in Gandhi and he insists on its priority to this day.

The second challenge is to our propensity to apply an institutional model of church on these pilgrims of Christ prematurely. It's clear in Chandler's interview with Mazhar that he doesn't like the way religion labels and separates people. 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. After fourteen centuries in which Muslims and Christians have each 'built a structure around God', Mazhar wants to deconstruct any traditional boundary that inhibits Jesus' access to the Muslim. Here is the heart of an evangelist who wants to broadcast the seed, to 'yeast' the Muslim world with the true nature of Christ. *The form of witness is his priority and calling, not the form of the church.*

If you will allow me to extrapolate a bit on Chandler, it seems that Mazhar is saying that *the idea of church must be a centring on the living Christ and not a hardening of institutional boundaries.* This explains his almost allergic reaction to anything *ecclesiastical*. Religious requirements can mistreat the sometimes delicate process of a Muslim coming to Christ. Religious institutionalization smacks of exclusion and must be minimized. Now, there's a tension here for the church planter. Some kind of appropriate structure is required to encourage and sustain young believers in this process. Mazhar suggests a

simple fellowship of people who are growing in their understanding of God meeting together to talk about Christ. As an Arab national he acts as the host in an atmosphere of *sacred hospitality*, allowing different ones to be at different places in their pilgrimage, but learning from one another in the Spirit of Christ. Its ethos is open, voluntary, sensitive to the individual and apparently socially and religiously heterogeneous. It appears to be a *pilgrimage structure* of travellers on the road to Christ. It also seems to fit more easily in the urban world of Cairo or Beirut than it does in the

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tight inclusiveness of a tribal world. And if it provides that *sense of belonging* and *at-homeness* for the Muslim seeker, can it expand, can it extend and can it nurture a movement? Might it not develop its own institutional character as it moves beyond a small and local nucleus? The church planter is left hanging, but his suspension must remain if this book means anything. Mazhar prioritizes those baby steps of the Muslim who sees Jesus clearly for the first time. He knows that earnest Muslim pilgrims of Christ need an open and culturally sensitive road in between the hardened religious systems of Islam and Christianity. He's telling us our ecclesiology should wrap itself around this critical reality.

If my enthusiasm for this book has not been manifest, let me simply say that it's a

blockbuster. Chandler has shown us the way to think empirically about the missiological issues that so often get caught up in abstract debate. Read it and let it push your thinking.

The image of pilgrim and of guest, the catalogue of stories, the anecdotes and the parables of life all make one feel the effectual power of Christ on the Muslim Road. It's a very bold narrative on a dangerous borderland, so one wonders how often we will see such exposure for our investigation.

But we need more books of this genre, ones rooted in the particulars of a Muslim context. Hats off to Chandler for launching us in the right direction and for Mazhar's vulnerability in letting his story be told.

RESPONSE TO GILL FROM THE AUTHOR

by Paul-Gordon Chandler

Brad,

Thank you for your very thoughtful and well-written review of *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road*. Your appraisal of the book is thorough and your comments and questions most astute. Clearly you have known Mazhar and caught the vitality of his unique journey with Christ. As you say, 'the evolution of Mazhar's attitude' is what has made the difference. At times I have found myself engaged in the full continuum of those attitudes, yet epiphanies of what freedom in Christ looks like emerge in a variety of colours through such fellow pilgrims.

You have generously translated what I have shared in the book into missiological terms and inferred the importance of Mazhar's essence as a follower of Christ. You caught his spirit in stating, 'love is the bridge to truth... the Arab cultural instinct in

Mazhar minimizes the need for logical resolution over against the consistent love of a fellow pilgrim who is discovering God through open and humble relationships'.² Christ walked among us, and does walk among us today along all roads of life, regardless of creed or culture and without the need to be labelled or confined to our religious terms and boundaries, or even worldviews for that matter. At times these delineations are helpful and at other times very harmful. I felt freedom in generalizing about evangelicals as I was raised as one and know that world well. But I do realize that the spectrum of belief and practice is extremely diverse and labels rarely accommodating. However, I am trying to dislodge boundaries a bit in all directions towards honest exploration.

