

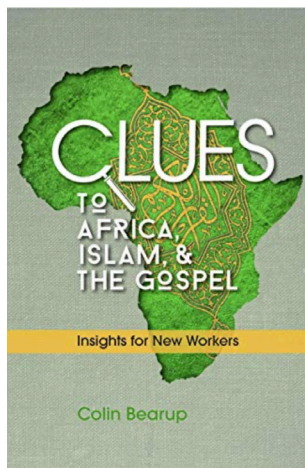
Clues to Africa, Islam, & the Gospel: Insights for New Workers

By Colin Bearup.

William Carey Publishing, 2020. 110 pages.

Reviewed by Walter Eric

Walter Eric (pseudonym) has been active in facilitating and training believers in outreach. He has been serving with Life Challenge since 1981 in South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana with ministry trips to many other countries across Africa and Asia. Besides personal coaching, Walter develops evangelistic and training resource materials in several languages in both print and film format.



“OBSERVE, CONNECT, & THRIVE IN AFRICA!” lines the back cover of this book, a prayerful appeal to new workers and an apt description of the book itself. Its author, Colin Bearup, writes from his experience as one who served for thirty years in Chad and is currently WEC’s Africa Area Training Consultant.

Anyone looking for simple answers or a formula for success in sharing the gospel and engaging with African Muslims will be disappointed. Bearup, faithful to the title, simply gives “clues” to inspire workers to reflect, discuss and plan tasks based on each chapter. The reader will certainly not be bored as the book is rich with fascinating personal experiences, provocative missiological thinking, and strategic insights.

Bearup invites his readers to explore ministry in the context of the African Islamic worldview by touching on a multitude of topics. He discusses the importance of asking the right questions, describes traditional African life, and compares the four major Islamic blocks in Sub-Saharan Africa. He explains the African incarnation of Islam, folk Islam vs. “real Islam,” and cultural concepts such as individualism/collectivism and high/low-context cultures. Other topics include guilt-shame-fear and the gospel, the importance of “patronage” in African culture, and how western theology can “make sense” in the African mindset. Bearup compares gospel presentations with programmed approaches, and he provides reflections on church planting.

To pack all this into less than 80 pages (excluding Discussion and Resource sections) demands both brevity from the writer and a willingness on the part of the readers to dig deeper on their own—and it is surely worth it. The presence of narratives – they often take readers into the topic in interesting and at times surprising turns – makes the book great reading. Missiological quotes and sharp critique provoke readers to reconsider approaches like chronological storytelling or discipleship programs such as DMM and that of the Navigators, though without going into great detail, leaving it less than clear which aspects of these approaches he finds less suitable for the African context.

I highlighted a number of common-sense truths and great insights from the book:

- “To understand people, we need to have some idea where they are coming from” (2)—simple and clear, but easily forgotten. It still hurts me when I remember what happened during a conference that involved ministry leaders from across East and West Africa. My Ugandan friend wanted to contribute to the discussion. He proceeded to rise from his seat, bowed respectfully to all participants in the hall, and only after another short pause did he begin to address all in a dignified manner. Unfortunately, by then the Nigerian chairman had lost patience with him and blurted out:

"If you have nothing to say, sit down!" To make it even worse, my Ugandan friend was clearly older than the chairman.

- "The core beliefs and practices [of Islam] are like the skeleton of a human body. On the street you never meet skeletons; you meet living, breathing people" (5). Wow! I never looked at it quite that way. Have I been too quick to debate apologetic issues rather than show interest in the life and needs of the one with whom I'm speaking?
- "As a general rule, African Muslims are resistant to the gospel without being hostile to Christians" (32). I agree and rejoice over this invitation for Christian-Muslim interaction. I remember reading Charles Marsh's advice: "You can say anything to a Muslim as long as you say it with a smile" (1978, 11).
- "Africans tend to be pragmatic rather than dogmatic" (39). Perhaps as westerners we have been brought up within theological/denominational fences, and often without noticing, we have packed this in our suitcases when we left our home countries.
- In the African context, "any person who seeks to be autonomous is morally suspect" (78). Really? Check that out and see if it sticks. As an urban missionary, I would tend to limit this to the rural context only.
- "The style of discipling used by Jesus (as in the Gospels) is a variety of patronage" (80). If you are a westerner, perhaps you would like to explore this important concept further.

Evaluation

It is not difficult to see the strengths of such a book. If you are a newcomer to missions in Africa, it sets your focus on matters of African worldview and cultural patterns, which are significant, yet not easily perceived in the midst of orientation and settling in. However, it may be preferable to simply observe Africa and connect with Africans before digging into a book with this broad spectrum of issues. Or you might give

it a fast read, note the major points and return after a year or two on the field to revisit these topics in discussion with other missionaries.

I arrived in Africa forty years ago almost to the day, and I still found the book quite fascinating—and at times sobering—reading. I echo Bearup's introductory comment: "I wish someone had told me how to interpret what was happening. I wish there had been a book to explain it all ahead of time" (1). In contrast to Bearup's setting in Chad, mine was in urban settings (Cape Town, Nairobi and Accra, with the exception of many trips teaching seminars in upcountry regions throughout Southern, East and West Africa, as well as SE Asia). All of Africa is not the same, and our urban settings have developed a much stronger mix of western and African worldviews. As such, not all "clues" given in the book fit perfectly in every African context.

Perhaps one would wish some African missionary, or even a missi-ological mind like Dr. Azumah (referenced in the resource section), to reflect and design a similar workbook for the growing number of African missionaries who are giving such an invaluable contribution to "finishing the task" in recent decades.

The book is certainly highly relevant for today's practitioners in reaching the least reached, especially for those serving in sub-Saharan Africa. Bearup is to be commended for resisting the temptation of adding yet another "method" to the "Camel—Storytelling—DMM—Seven Muslim—Christian Principles—C2C Presentations" (and others promoted from time to time) lineup.

Additional missiological reflections and critique by Colin Bearup is available at his website: www.sahelchurchplanter.wordpress.com.

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Bibliography

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