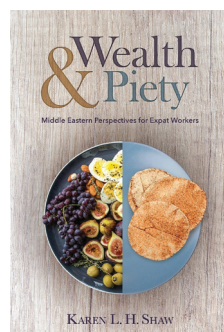


Wealth & Piety: Middle Eastern Perspectives for Expat Workers

Karen L. H. Shaw. William Carey Publishing, 2018. 190 pages.

Reviewed by J.F.

J.F. moved as a tentmaker to the Arabian Gulf 19 years ago, with his wife and four children, after Arabic study in the Levant and ministry among Arab Muslim immigrants in the United States. In the Gulf, the slow responsiveness of nationals led them to diverse avenues and partnerships to promote church planting among locals. In the last three years, they have been involved in a local church.



Why I Read This Book

We were clueless and unprepared for what we have faced over the last 30 years of ministry among Arabs. We read good books¹ and had good training, so we expected the requests for money and assistance in acquiring a visa to the West, but our own cultural background made it difficult to comprehend the dynamics which were at play. Living in an expensive and wealthy Arab Gulf nation for the last 19 years has made the financial requests bigger and more complex. Not only were we perceived as wealthy since we are from the West, but my employment, benefits, and our life status with adult children meant we indeed had surplus, to

1 One of the most eye-opening books was *Miniskirts, Mothers and Muslims* by Christine Mallouhi, and more recently, Don Little's *Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities: Scripture, History and Seasoned Practices* ([reviewed](#) in Seedbed).

which some of our dear brothers and sisters seemed to feel they should have access! Whether in the context of media follow-up or walking with leaders of a newly established indigenous church, where I serve as both treasurer and a conduit for external funding, our perplexity was reaching a crisis point. When should we give? How can we say, “No”? What’s the best way and time to teach biblical thinking on wealth, caring for the needy, and giving to church? What assumptions of mine must change?

The Author and Her Research

And so, we read more books about generosity², partnership,³ patronage,⁴ and aid,⁵ but none more fully explored the dynamics than Karen Shaw’s *Wealth and Piety*. The author has lived in the Middle East since 1990, where she is assistant professor of cross-cultural ministry at Arab Baptist Theological Seminary near Beirut, Lebanon. In the foreword, Timothy Tennant accurately writes, “It is truly a gift that Karen Shaw has identified one of the deepest challenges cross-cultural workers from the West face: How to navigate the perceptions and obligations which are rooted in wealth disparity between ourselves and those whom we

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- 2 *Leverage: Using Temporal Wealth for Eternal Gain*, by Russ Crosson. Encourages Western wealthy Christians to determine when they have ‘enough’ and go well beyond a tithe. Application was primarily in funding organizations. We realized that a major stress in our context is not having the comfort of feeling in control of when, to whom, and how much we give, in the face of expectation and sometimes sense of entitlement.
 - 3 *Cross-Cultural Partnerships: Navigating the Complexities of Money and Mission* by Lederleitner, M. T., & Elmer, D. (2010). The book’s context of relationships between typically Western funding organizations and field Majority World ministries provided insight for managing my role between ours and other organizations and local ministry and projects (especially helping me see the need to work toward local believers taking over my role).
 - 4 *Ministering in Patronage Cultures* by Jayson Georges ([reviewed in Seedbed](#)). This book, written a year after *Wealth & Piety*, truly opened our eyes to perplexing dynamics in many of our relationships, where we were sometimes clients and often patrons. Georges demonstrates how pervasive patronage is in Scripture, as an element of honor-shame dynamics, and suggests how we might redeem its negative aspects.
 - 5 *When Helping Hurts* by Corbett and Fikkert ([reviewed in this issue of Seedbed](#)). While the context is primarily organizational aid for relief and development, the principles help the reader grow more discerning at recognizing unintended consequences.

serve” (xv). The author does this less by personal observation, and more by a survey of 190 Lebanese and 35 in-depth qualitative interviews with representatives of nine Middle-Eastern countries of varying age, gender, religion, sect, and financial means, from very poor to moderately wealthy (57).⁶ A gift indeed!

The Book’s Structure and Content

Shaw’s work thoroughly addresses several topics, is extensively annotated with both Scripture and other works, and includes many lists and summaries which offer numerous facets to each topic. The spectrum of details and anecdotes make it difficult to summarize here; I can only whet your appetite! After two chapters giving Old and New Testament descriptions of the “righteous rich,”⁷ she describes the “righteous” ideal of her Muslim and Christian sources for each of seven topics (see TOC below), indicating both what is culturally expected as well noting frequently observed contradictions. For each topic, she summarizes relevant Bible texts and perceptively identifies gaps between local ideal/application and Scripture. Challenges for expats are identified as well as the complexities that Arabs must navigate. Though she did not answer all my questions, Shaw presents implications for both the ministry *and lifestyle* of the Western worker serving in the Middle East. While her work reflects her academic role, she makes the content very accessible.

The Righteous Rich

I think that individualism in the West and our value of self-reliance overly simplify our view of wealth. We consider ourselves far from halls of power and justice, and so do not consider the extensive body of teaching

6 She did not have access to the very wealthy to give them a hearing (xxiii, 148 note 500).

7 Shaw realized her own confusion upon reading Jonathan Bonk’s *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem* (1991), whose suggested approach defines the outline of her book (xv, xx).

in the Law and Prophets on those matters as relevant to us. We look *up* to the wealthy in the Bible and the modern “rich and famous,” not realizing that relative to most on the planet, we *are* materially wealthy. Shaw’s two chapters on the righteous rich are therefore very relevant to us!

Her thorough Old Testament survey looks at the lives of Abraham, Job, Solomon; along with the teaching of Deuteronomy, Proverbs and Amos. For the New Testament, she covers the Sermon on the Mount, Acts and the Church in Jerusalem, the unrighteous rich in James, and the righteous rich in 1 Timothy. She considers their historical and cultural contexts, and notes some commonalities with the modern Middle Eastern context. She concludes that the “biblical mosaic” cannot be conformed into a “single, simple image,” but she does notice patterns, yet she wisely avoids turning biblical teaching into a list of rules. “True righteousness will go beyond the precise requirements of the law because it blossoms forth from a relationship with God in which God’s generous character is infused into the affections and behaviors of his righteous one” (56).

Most of us have come to the Arab world because we have something to say. Shaw provides a crucial reminder that, “Sometimes it is necessary to display a grasp of divine wisdom about practical ethics before one has the credibility to talk doctrine” (71). Most evangelical training focuses on doctrine, apologetics, and *personal* piety, leaving the Western Christian with a weak framework of ethics (for reasons of multi-culturalism, emphasis on personal freedom, or protecting the gospel from works – a fear not shared by the NT, eg. Titus 3:5-8). The demands of collective duty in Middle Eastern society and expectation to see ethics externalized and articulated lead both to being misunderstood by locals and to culture stress for the new arrival.

A Sample of Content

How We're Perceived

Cross-cultural workers must be ready to answer questions about the source of their finances! Shaw provides helpful ideas on navigating the complexities of this question. She notes, "Many Middle Easterners seem to follow the rule, 'When in doubt, assume the worst'" (109).

We must understand how our choices are perceived by those we serve. As she says, "the Westerner might be surprised at the degree to which people observe and comment on the lifestyle choices of others" [including you!] (122, note 474). It is essential to understand that our actions may be misinterpreted, and our good intentions will not rescue us, "some things which we see as honorable [Do-It-Yourself projects; delight in thrift store purchases] are considered humiliating by Middle Easterners" (135).

Shaw relates a fascinating observation from one pastor, who said that "many foreign Christians had little impact in the Middle East with people at any economic level because their work orientation and introversion kept them aloof" (148). The pastor encourages us to be more involved with the community and church, not only spiritually, but socially. I am astonished at the level of pastoral engagement of the Gulf Arab leaders I have the privilege of serving among. Collectiveness and relationship permeate every aspect of their life and being, in significant contrast to my individualistic notions of time and money. I think the expectations of the collective play a role in intimidating some of us toward greater introversion!

Financial Ministry Partnerships

Cross-cultural workers must work towards accountability and transparency in financial partnership (regardless of how foreign it is) but should expect frustration regarding accountability over handling designated funding (101). "We also need to guard against using donations

from our organizations to control and manipulate” (173) or create disunity through buying loyalty. Pastors benefit from access to outside support, yet Shaw urges caution “in entering into a relationship with a Christian leader whose political and financial ambitions exceed his godliness” (175). Shaw presents good insight on bribery and corruption which are prevalent in several Arab countries.

Patronage

Attempts to merely have a social relationship or provide spiritual teaching with someone of unequal social status while avoiding requests for assistance on any scale (passport, money, work) are unrealistic. The worker from the West is expected to use their connections “to help all with whom they associate, using those connections to their advantage. ... Refusal to attempt to patronize the person in this way will call into question the sincerity of the missionary’s friendship or worthiness as an influence in the community” (172). As patrons, we can use our influence to develop believers through teaching and mentoring, rather than just giving handouts. She highlights opportunities to model and teach on righteousness in the workplace, business, and family: “many families, especially among the poor, need training in how to get out of debt, live within their means, respond to extortion, manage money, save, and work toward realistic financial goals” (120).

Give Generously

When asked for help, we should involve others with more discretion, since Westerners are “too trusting,” and the requester may be exploiting our ignorance. “Middle Easterners as a rule are very skilled at detecting deception in another person” (136). Shaw described that help to the poor must be “in a manner which does not compromise the honor of the recipient. ... if you give a donation but take away the person’s honor, you have robbed that person by taking what is more precious than the gift you have given” (91). Cross-cultural workers should lavish honor on

guests through hospitality to show oneself as an honorable person (99). They should learn from their community *how* to give, and what not to say. Using the wrong words with generosity can unintentionally shame the recipient and lead to rejection of the gift.

Constrained by Budget?

Expat workers may feel “virtuously deprived” having sacrificed career, comfort, and family proximity to move overseas (xx). However, we should not expect “understanding, gratitude, or applause from Middle Easterners” for what opportunities you left behind to come serve, but rather suspicion (101)! Regardless of how tight our budget is, as we try to cover expenses with support, the Middle-Easterner sees us as wealthy. Our donors may like how frugally we live, but our frequent international travel gives an impression of wealth to our neighbors (75–77). To reflect righteousness/piety to those we serve, and to live as one who is respected as honorable, we must spend and give money that is likely outside our budget! How? I recommend expat workers budget funds to practice generous hospitality at home and outside in order to build relationships and connections, and have a team-managed organizational project account (or one’s own tithe) to give some material help to those in need.

The Book’s Value

The book provides a wealth of understanding (no pun intended) to the expat worker. It is preferable to decades learned the hard way, as it can take some personal mistakes to gain the “aha” moment of what the books are trying to address. Although the book did not give me easy answers to address the solicitations we face, it deepened my understanding of the culture and helped me articulate guidance to help other expats. While the Lebanese context is paramount in the book, and the focus is not exclusively on the BMB (believers of Muslim background) context, the biblical research on the “righteous rich” is applicable in any

context. There are other aspects which are relevant across the Arab, and to a lesser extent, Islamic world.

The book can also be helpful to English-fluent Arab ministry leaders who partner with Western expats. Arab partners will not only benefit from Shaw's biblical surveys, they may also better comprehend some of the challenges with which expats wrestle—which puzzle them. (The indigenous leader I serve, who lived in the West, will often “interpret” to other Arabs the underlying perspective behind my words.) Effective partnership with nationals must involve mutual understanding and forbearance; this book may help Arabs more explicitly understand both expat perspectives and their own operative assumptions.

Finally, the book increased my gratitude for the Arabs God has put around us. These include BMB leaders with whom we process challenges we face while watching them grow and learn from consequences of their own actions. They also include Muslims and other BMBs who allow us to see them wrestle with complexities of “wealth and piety” in their own lives. As God brings Arab believers together in community across tribal and economic lines, they also struggle with these matters, as they navigate a new faith and text, persecution, limited resources, high expectations, expat partners, outside funding, and unwanted attention from authorities.

If you are in relational ministry in the Arab world or in similar contexts, this book will help you practically navigate the financial dimension of living and serving cross-culturally.

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