

## Islamic Culture and Christian Missions

*The author describes first the various ecological patterns in the Arab world: camel pastoralism, sheep and goat pastoralism, and agriculture, then the social structures prevalent in villages and in cities. The latter, though they contain a minority of the population, exercise a disproportionate influence, and missions ought to recognize this fact in their planning. The family is shown to be the dominant social unit, with males in firm control. Extended kinship bonds and cross-cutting moieties structure the larger society. In the arts, poetic development predominates, and the Christian message must be couched in adequate linguistic form. Religious life, though firmly based on Islam, contains many heterogeneous elements; monotheism is very strongly held, so that caution must be exercised in presenting the Christian doctrine of God so as not to exacerbate the prevalent impression that Christianity is polytheistic.*

DUE to its brevity this essay cannot be comprehensive, nor can it probe deeply into the complexities of the Middle East, for as Carleton S. Coon has well observed, the diversity of peoples and subcultures in the Middle East is an "intricate mosaic."<sup>1</sup> The domination of Islam supplies the unity in this mosaic, although there are significant minorities who do not identify with Islam. This survey makes no claim to complete originality, for many scholars have devoted themselves to the Middle East. However, most of their work has not been linked with a desire, central in this essay, to suggest cultural features relevant to fostering

<sup>1</sup>Caravan: *The Story of the Middle East* (Rev. ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1958), chap. 1.

Christian missionary effort. Much of the following is especially indebted to the anthropologist Raphael Patai, who offers many penetrating insights into Middle Eastern culture.<sup>2</sup> I have also conducted field study in the Middle East on three occasions.

<sup>2</sup>*Golden River to Golden Road: Society, Culture and Change in the Middle East* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967).

George Jennings is assistant professor of anthropology at Wheaton College, Wheaton Ill. 60187, U.S.A. He holds an M.A. and is a candidate for a Ph. D. in anthropology from the University of Minnesota. He has written a number of articles on various aspects of Iranian culture and other topics.

### Ecology

Since the beginning of recorded history a basic ecologic dichotomy has prevailed in the vast area extending across northern Africa through southwest Asia to Pakistan and Turkestan in southern and central Asia. In general, this region is covered with deserts interspersed with oases. Mountain ranges capture heavier precipitation which gives relief to the widespread aridity. And, of course, there is Breasted's "Fertile Crescent," which arcs from the Nile Valley to Mesopotamia. Pastoralism predominates in the arid and semiarid sections where seasonal plant growth permits herding camels, goats, and sheep while agriculture occurs in restricted areas where rainfall is adequate, or more commonly, irrigation is possible. Irrigation is practiced both in the river valleys and, utilizing wells, on the gently-sloping piedmonts.

The larger, drier expanses are occupied by camel-breeding nomads whose pastoral economy depends to such a high degree on camels that it might well be called a "camel culture." Formerly the nomads relied even more exclusively on the camel in a fashion comparable to the Laplanders' dependence on the reindeer. Those of the nomads' needs which the camel failed to provide directly, it was used as barter to procure: foodstuffs, weapons, utensils, cloth, and similar material.

Since Hollywood has glamorized and romanticized this desert life (somewhat in the fashion it has the American cowboy's life), two basic

corrections to the general Western conception of Middle Eastern life are relevant for the missionary. The first is that only a minority of Middle Eastern people are engaged in this mode of life; it is not the typical economy of the area, for peasant cultivators predominate numerically. The second point to note is that many of these nomads are not "hard core" Muslims in the sense of observing intensively the tenets of the faith. One need only read Musil<sup>3</sup> and Barth<sup>4</sup> to obtain a more accurate picture of the life and religion of most Middle Eastern nomads.

In the transitional steppe areas between the desert and the oases and in the irrigated river valleys, a modification of camel pastoralism occurs. The steppes, especially during the cool rainy season, have adequate vegetation for sheep and goats, which require better forage than the camel and a daily source of drinking water. The shepherds attending these flocks are less nomadic than the camel keepers, although many of them migrate with their flocks seasonally. The moist and cooler months find them grazing their sheep and goats in the steppe areas of the desert, but with the onset of the hot, dry summers they move their animals to the better-watered mountain slopes and valleys. In some cases these seminomads engage in limited agriculture to supplement their income from the flocks; thus they represent a transitional economy between the true

<sup>3</sup>Alois Musil, *The Manners and the Customs of the Rwala Bedouins* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1928).

<sup>4</sup>Frederik Barth, *Nomads of South Persia* (New York: Humanities Press, 1961).

nomads and the sedentary cultivators. There have been instances where some of these people have abandoned seasonal migrations and have become settled cultivators but kept their flocks somewhat after the fashion of the ancient Hebrews, who made the transition from seminomadism after their occupation. Religiously, the seminomads tend to adhere more closely to Islamic dicta and ritual than true nomads.

### Social Structure

The tribal structure of the true nomads and the seminomads is practically identical everywhere in the Middle East. Both groups divide into tribes composed more or less of those who have real or fictive kinship ties plus subordinate artisans and slaves. Apart from the latter two groups, each tribe has considerable homogeneity, and the native members are regarded as social equals.

However, as is frequently the case in using "tribe" as a social designation, tribal identity and affinity is, to the Westerner, a rather vague tie, quite apart from the merging of weaker tribes with more powerful ones. The missionary must be aware that tribal identification is a cultural ideal, but for practical interaction with the people the effective, functional unit is the camp or wandering group. Such groups vary greatly in size as well as in standing within the tribal structure. Despite the considerable equality of bona fide tribal members, the true camel nomads are usually considered an aristocracy. They lord it over the artisan groups, which attach themselves to the nomads and perform services for the ruling

elite. Ranking a step lower than the prestigious camel breeders are the sheep and goat nomads, who together with the camel keepers exhibit scorn and contempt for the settled cultivators, or peasants, who are deemed inferior because they are slaves of the soil.

The Middle Eastern village, be it composed of Muslims or some minority group, is most commonly divided along kinship lines. Despite kinship divisions, occupationally the typical village is fairly homogeneous, for practically all its inhabitants engage in agricultural pursuits. In settlement pattern, the villages tend to be arranged in linear clusters. They are located where the combination of arable land and adequate rainfall permit the production of crops, or, to be more accurate, the villages with their surrounding gardens and fields are situated in river plains or piedmonts where irrigation is possible.

Cereal crops, especially wheat and barley, are the most common, but cotton, tobacco, and commercial crops may be very important in certain areas, and fruit trees and vineyards are significant where steep slopes or rocky soil restrict open field tilling. Since the winter or cool season is usually the rainy period, most fields are sown at the beginning of what is the autumn harvest time in the American Midwest, and Middle Eastern cereals are reaped and threshed at the onset of the dry, hot summers. In many cases agricultural techniques and implements are much the same as they were in biblical times. An effective missionary program will relate scriptural truths to the pastoral and agrarian tempo of Middle

Eastern life, recognizing that many Middle Eastern festivals and ceremonies coincide with seasonal activities of the nomads and peasants.

Commercial exchange occurs constantly between the sedentary and the nomadic peoples. Most of the trading takes place in the towns and cities, usually with merchants acting as intermediaries. Despite the nomads' real and freely expressed scorn for the villagers, the pastoralists are dependent to a considerable extent upon the cultivators for their supplies, especially cereal grains. Thus a semi-symbiotic relationship exists between the nomads and the villagers wherein each group contributes products essential to the other group's customary manner of life. In the main, it is the services of town traders and merchants which make this symbiosis possible; hence, commercial activity accounts for the presence and importance of many towns and cities. The shrewdness of Middle Eastern merchants and traders is proverbial, and bartering, considerably vitiated by recent floods of Western tourists accustomed to fixed prices, has traditionally been a significant part of social intercourse.

Although largely absent from the contemporary scene, formerly raiding enemy encampments, caravans, and especially villages was customary and was considered legitimate within the context of tribal mores. The hoary antiquity of raiding in the Middle East is illustrated by David, who during the period when Saul sought to slay him, headed a band that retaliated with raiding against those who had so ravaged Judah's countryside (I Samuel 27).

As a matter of fact, raiding the relatively helpless villagers seems to have been considered somewhat of a profitable sport whereby materials and foodstuffs could be procured without payment. Evidently, rules of the game were recognized. It was considered appropriate to raid at dawn. Camel mounts were used to approach the encampment or village. At some strategic site they would be exchanged for the prized Arabian horses which had been led there unmounted. Mounted on the fresh horses, the raiders would swoop down upon their victims. A rather curious twist to this raiding pattern occurred following World War I when automobiles were introduced among the nomads. The archaeologist Crowfoot remarked that he had observed raids conducted with Fords and Chevrolets!

### Cities

Even though only a minority of Middle Eastern people dwell in the large towns and cities (most dwell in villages), the urban centers exercise a disproportionate influence and control over the lives of the masses. This fact has numerous implications for missionary programs. For example, it is to be remembered that Islam has not sprung from either the desert encampments or agricultural villages. It had its beginning in the important trade and commercial cities of Mecca and Medina and attained its greatest influence when Damascus and Baghdad became political and cultural centers. The centers of contemporary Islamic thought and learning are in cities like Cairo. The urban population,

especially the upper class and the growing middle class which are a distinct minority, dominates: in religion, education, art and politics as it does in commerce. The greatest degree of Westernization occurs in the urban centers, from whence innovations diffuse into the hinterlands. Foster, together with other students of acculturation, has suggested that cities are focal points of change.<sup>5</sup> The customary pattern in that change begins among the upper classes, then gradually spreads downward to the traditionally inarticulate lower classes and outward to the countryside. However, while the villagers take their lead from the prestigious urban dwellers, they do so with considerable hesitation, misgiving, and even resistance. In the Middle East there is a relatively steep acculturation gradient between the changing cities and the traditional rural communities and nomadic camps.

A triple class structure exists, with an upper class of wealthy landowners and political leaders, a middle class made up of merchants, professional people, skilled artisans, and educators, and the much larger lower class comprised of unskilled laborers. This class structure is most pronounced in the cities and towns; it is less apparent in the villages and is almost nonexistent in the nomadic camps, where there may be, however, a distinction between free men and slaves.

Since most Americans and Europeans, including missionaries, reside in relatively comfortable quarters in

<sup>5</sup>George M. Foster, *Traditional Cultures: And the Impact of Technological Change* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 29-31.

the towns and cities, the lower classes and villagers categorize them as upper class people with considerable wealth. This class identification has both advantages and disadvantages for missionary efforts. The prestige accorded the American missionary fosters rapport with the indigenous upper classes and induces deferential treatment from the lower classes and villagers. On the other hand, to be identified with the upper classes is to be associated with those characteristically most receptive to Western secularism and links the missionary with those who traditionally have exploited the lower classes and rural people.

Though the point is not peculiar to the Middle East, it may be well to distinguish between the city and the town. The difference is really one of degree rather than of kind, with the cities being more populous, having greater political significance, and offering a greater range of occupational specialization. Cities usually have national, and even international, influence in contrast to the provincialism characteristic of the more numerous towns. Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, Istanbul, and Tehran may be cited to illustrate the greater influence of cities which makes them known beyond national boundaries, but how many people know anything about such important towns as Konya, Kerman, Qena, Herat, Meshed, and many others?

Of course, there are striking differences between the cities and towns and the thousands of villages. Villages may have a population of several thousand (although the most common figure is in the hundreds), but the inhabitants

give themselves almost completely to agriculture or intimately related occupations. Village life lacks both the economic opportunities and the amenities afforded by urban centers—again a feature not confined to the Middle East—hence the migration from rural communities to the urban centers with the unfortunate consequences so readily observable in the pathetic slum conditions found in all Middle Eastern cities.

Not only is Westernization, for better or worse, centered mainly in the cities and towns, but also, as noted briefly above, the adoption of Western ideas is most pronounced in the upper class. The middle class is affected somewhat less, while the lower class usually has changed the least. The people in the middle and lower classes tend to resist innovations and to cling more closely to traditional customs. As a consequence, those in the lower classes are the ones most readily incited by Islamic leaders to oppose Christian evangelization. The acculturated elite are mostly indifferent to religion, which, if they are engaged in political leadership, they frequently view as an expedient means to obtain a loyal following among the masses. Western ideas have promoted secularism among the upper classes, although there are some important exceptions to this tendency.

#### Family

It is difficult for contemporary urban Americans to appreciate the dominant role played by the family in Middle Eastern social organization. Even in urban centers, where most change has occurred, life revolves

about the family, and it dominates in all classes. We may most concisely describe the family characteristics significant for missionary contact and success by employing anthropological terminology.

First, the Middle Eastern family is extended in form. The typical household is composed of the nuclear family—parents and children—plus other close relatives either married or unmarried. Second, the family is strongly patrilineal, which means that there is a pronounced bias for making the important links and associations with the father's relatives or kin. Third, the family usually observes the residence rule known as virilocality. At marriage the couple either moves into the groom's parental household or lives nearby in the same village or ward in the city. Fourth, the family is markedly patriarchal, with the father invariably an authoritarian figure revered and obeyed by the entire household.

Fifth, the ideal Middle Eastern marriage is endogamous. The most desirable union is one between parallel cousins; that is, if possible a young man will marry his father's brother's daughter. If no such relative exists, the young man will seek as his bride some girl related to him through agnatic reckoning.<sup>6</sup> Polygyny, or the practice of having more than one wife is permitted and occurs occasionally as allowed by

<sup>6</sup>An agnatic relative is any person related to one solely through male links. Thus all the children of one's father, all the children of his son, all the those of his father, all those of his father's father, and all the children of any of their sons—but not of their daughters—would be agnatic kin.

the Quran, but it is limited by economic circumstances among the lower classes and by Westernization among the upper classes. Thus the present Shah of Iran declined the suggestion that he engage in polygyny when his first and second wives did not bear him a male heir to the throne as Middle Eastern custom demands. He chose instead to follow the Western pattern of divorce and remarriage.

Paradoxically in a culture that emphasizes marriage and family, the male-dominated system permits relatively easy divorce, which the displeased husband can procure by repeating the simple statement "I divorce thee" three times before witnesses. The woman must follow a much more complicated legal procedure to gain divorce. In arranging marriages, the practice of bride price (erroneously confused with dowry by Western people) continues. The groom, usually with assistance from his family and kin, gives the bride's father and family a payment in kind or money. This custom, of course, further illustrates the strength of family ties, for it reveals clearly the interest of both families in the marriage that now links them. All this underscores the family's critical importance. Its significance must be appreciated in any missionary program, for the individual's wishes are subordinate to the family's decisions and pattern of life.

Throughout history the Middle East has had a markedly strong double sexual standard. There is rigorous compulsion upon women to retain premarital virginity and later to exclude any extramarital sexual life. Similar restrictions do not apply to men, who may

visit prostitutes in the towns and cities with comparative freedom, somewhat after the custom implied in Judah's sexual affair with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, whom he believed to be a prostitute (Genesis 38).

How could female prostitution arise among peoples who exercise extreme caution to preserve female chastity? The answer is that if a girl engages in a sexual affair and is detected, whereas formerly the disgrace led her father or a brother to put the girl to death, it is now common to abandon her in a town or city. The result, in this male-dominated culture where women have been largely excluded from employment in honorable occupations, is that the unfortunate girl lacking skills or training is forced into prostitution for a livelihood. In somewhat similar circumstances, many divorced wives resort to prostitution.

A rather naive custom (practiced since Old Testament times but now becoming rare) which emphasizes the theme of female chastity is observed in connection with the consummation of marriage on the wedding night. A white cloth is placed upon the conjugal bed to be stained with blood from the bride's ruptured hymen. This stained cloth is then retained by the bride's family as evidence of their daughter's purity to prevent the husband from subsequently accusing the girl of premarital unchastity.

The practice of veiling girls and women continues sporadically in Islamic countries. Of the middle and upper classes in the towns, it is especially the conservative women who continue to wear veils, as do some village and

nomadic women. This custom rests, of course, upon the longstanding tradition that women are to be secluded from the gaze of males outside the immediate family. Incidentally, the wearing of these veils reveals that notions of modesty are integrally related to cultural values. There is little or no embarrassment for veiled mothers to bare their breasts to nurse their babies in public, as I have observed in such modern centers as Beirut and Tehran, but to bare the head is taboo.

The theme of modesty is carried over into many Islamic homes where the female members absent themselves from rooms where the husband and sons are entertaining male guests. A male friend and I were entertained in a doctor's home in a provincial town on one occasion, and during the entire evening, including dinner, the mother and daughters failed to appear in the same room with us although we could hear their voices as they prepared dinner in adjacent rooms. A missionary failing to take this cultural bent into account can do irreparable damage to his effectiveness, and such customs suggest that using missionary couples, husband and wife teams, will be part of the solution to female seclusion among Islamic peoples.

#### Kinship

Internally the nomadic camps and the villages are most commonly welded together with kinship bonds. Patrilineages invariably connect the various extended families, and it is not unusual for many persons to identify with a majority of their fellow villagers or campers through some kin link. Of

course, kin ties may be intervillage as well as intravillage. The stress on male kin ties in a virilocality system does not mean that wives are always from another village or camp. As has been noted earlier, endogamy is preferred, and the marriage of parallel cousins is considered an ideal; therefore, the wives as well as the husbands are frequently native to the village.

The towns and cities modify the kin patterns considerably. In the heterogeneous urban populations kin ties may relate the individual to a sizable company, but the traditional kin patterns are frequently weakened, and many of one's social relationships are with non-kin. This fact is significant for the missionary in that the individual is more receptive to suggestions and influence outside the kinship pattern.

For urban dwellers, groups constituted by voluntary membership supplement the somewhat fragmented or weakened kinship links. These urban groups, called associations or sodalities by anthropologists, are mostly guilds with membership derived from various professions or occupations. However, in contrast to American ways, Middle Eastern professions and occupations, and hence membership in the guilds, are often hereditary. A son succeeds his father in business. The sons serve their father as apprentices until the father relinquishes the business to them. This occupational pattern fosters considerable stability, for a son is less likely to innovate as an apprentice, and his apprenticeship carries him past youth, when he would tend to be more receptive to new and different ideas. Hence the Middle

Easterner develops a high degree of security in a relatively static system where there is less uncertainty than characterizes Western culture, which confronts the oncoming generation with confusing occupational alternatives. Kinship ties, then, cannot be completely divorced from the Middle Eastern commercial and professional associations, since kin links are influential and may dominate in many guilds.

In Islamic cultures an individual does not customarily make important decisions without conferring with his family, to which he usually subordinates his wishes. The implications of this are that the individual participates with the larger groups and institutions of society—economically, socially, and religiously—through his family membership rather than as an individual. The mediational role of the family obviously has profound significance for the Christian missionary or any other person who wishes to introduce cultural innovations. Usually it is futile to seek for a person to make a decision or commit himself to an ideology on his own. He will feel compelled to consult his family in an effort to gain their concurrence, for the family members make decisions and act in union under paternal authoritarianism.

Another form of social identity influential among many Islamic peoples is a loosely-formed duality which separates the various tribes into opposing moieties. This loose division is true both of tribal federations and of the settled populations found in the villages and towns. Raphael Patai has

surveyed this feature of social structure in different countries and concludes that it "is one of the general characteristics of Middle Eastern culture."<sup>7</sup> Each side of such a duality is conscious of itself as a separate group with different modes of behavior and attributes to itself distinctive character traits.

Significantly, these moieties usually do not pit one ethnic group against another. In Lebanon, for example, the two moieties are called Qays and Yaman, and each is composed of nomads, villagers, and townspeople, as well as Muslims, Christians, and Druzes. The dual system tends to reinforce the endogamous bent of Middle Eastern society; intermarriage with the opposite moiety is frowned upon. Also, patrilineality is extended into the moiety system. Belief is prevalent that there exists an unbroken genetic connection between the present membership of the two moieties and a mythical ancestry leading to two founders. Symbols are used for identification; for example, the Qays moiety identifies with white.

The relation between the two moieties of a region is generally hostile. Although latent at times, hostility often leads to open fighting, and a major part of the wars occurring in Islamic countries have been fought between opposing moieties. It would be both interesting and relevant to know more about the contemporary alignment of the two moieties in those engaged in war with Israel. Are those who traditionally have been opposed finding a common cause in the encounter

<sup>7</sup>Golden River to Golden Road, p. 179.

with Israeli forces? Also we might ask what the possible consequences would be if there should be widespread acceptance of Christianity by one of the moieties.

On the local level of the camps and villages social control and political leadership rest on family ties and influence. The typical village has a headman who is commonly linked with the community's most powerful family—power is determined by wealth, family size, and traditional prestige. The headman is assisted by a council of elders who usually represent headship in the village's influential families. Customarily the headmanship passes to a son or some near male relative, but succession requires approval by the council of elders, also. On this local level, social control in the traditional village is like that in the nomadic groups where the sheikh, or chief, exercises authority not by force but by the esteem, reknown, and prestige that he possesses. In the semi-autocratic and semidemocratic social control of the camp and village with its informality and variability, the charismatic individual is the most effective leader. The balance of power between the headman and the council depends on the headman's personality, which may foster loyalty and obedience or may antagonize people and minimize his control. The missionary will do well to identify both the headman and the council and the extent of influence each has. The evidence indicates that the early missionaries' failure to understand the leadership patterns and their strength has limited Middle Eastern acceptance of the Gospel.

By way of contrast, in the cities and towns newly-introduced Western governmental forms have altered somewhat the traditional feudalistic, oligarchic, and, occasionally, despotic rule. Unfortunately, some Middle Eastern countries have gone from the older forms to dictatorships with the countries' wealth and control of their financial policies concentrated in the hands of a few "great" families. The enormous wealth gained by a relatively few leaders from exploiting the vast oil resources, or rather the revenues paid by Western petroleum companies for permission to exploit the oil resources, has aggravated the economic disparity between the wealthy minority and the impoverished masses. Many rich landowners formerly gave at least a modicum of attention to the needs of the tenant cultivators to insure continued income from their landholdings; but, apart from certain exceptions, their huge income from oil revenues has made the landowners (who frequently occupy powerful governmental positions, also) less attentive to the villagers' needs.

It is significant that to a considerable extent earlier tribal loyalties are retained in the recently-emerging political organizations. Hence any aspiring leader's effort to unify the "Arab World" by some sort of over-all confederation will probably be futile, and we may predict that international instability in the Middle East will persist. It is common knowledge that the greatest semblance of international cooperation among Islamic countries rests upon a negative cause rather than a positive program: the desire to

destroy Israel. Consequently, Islamic opposition to the Christian message is aggravated by the political backing the "Christian" nations (which are the main source of missionary activity) give Israel.

#### Standard of Living

To one accustomed to the high American standard of living, the economic circumstances of the majority of the people in the Middle East are appalling. Poverty, subsistence-level living, an excessively high incidence of disease, a high birth rate, a high death rate (especially a pathetically high infant mortality rate), and low life expectancy are tragically commonplace. The majority of the cultivators either own merely dwarf holdings, are share-crop tenants, or are landless laborers. A well-balanced diet is unavailable in most rural areas, and medical care, even for maternity cases, is either lacking or minimal. Clean, potable water is not obtainable in many villages and towns, and an absence of suitable latrines adds to the widespread unsanitary conditions. Sanitation is an idea foreign to most of the people.

For example, it is a shock to observe as I did, women forming cakes of animal dung to be used for fuel (as is common in lands where wood is rare and the cost of commercial fuels is prohibitive for the impoverished villagers), and upon hearing the cries of their infants lying in the shade of a mud wall, wash their dung-covered hands in the filthy puddle that was being used in forming the dung cakes, and nurse the babies in complete nonchalance! Or again, dishes are washed

in irrigation ditches open to pollution by the excreta of animals.

Examples like these could easily be multiplied despite initial efforts to provide the poverty-stricken population with an elementary awareness of hygiene and sanitation. The worst conditions are found in the villages and the city slums; due to their periodic migrations the nomadic camps escape the unsanitary accumulations characteristic of sedentary life.

Efforts to alleviate the overwhelming illiteracy among Middle Eastern peoples by introducing formal education and schools have had considerable success, but the schools are not yet plentiful enough to enable many to attend. There have been attempts to modify the age-old Quranic schools to include more in their curriculum than rote memorization of Quranic passages. On the Christian side, several schools established to propagate evangelical Christianity have shifted to programs almost entirely secular in purpose and content, an unfortunate turn of events since education will continue to be imperative in any effective missionary program. The illiteracy rate for women is higher than for men, more Muslims cannot read or write than non-Muslims (Christians and Jews), the nomads tend to be less literate than the sedentary populace, and the villagers lack the educational opportunities afforded the urban dwellers.

#### Aesthetic Preoccupation

It must be noted that the prevalent illiteracy does not mean that the people lack a rich storehouse of oral literature, for this they have—indeed are

preoccupied with—consisting of folk stories and legends, poetry and folk songs, riddles and proverbs. The Middle East is heir to a portion of the famed "Wisdom of the East," which flavors all aspects of life with a mellow maturity. Any missionary seeking rapport with the people will do well to become acquainted with and respect this cultural richness. Besides creating rapport, it can be a means for presenting the Gospel.

Furthermore, few cultures are as adept in communicating events of the contemporary world through a grapevine of bazaars, cafes, markets, village wells and threshing floors, tent encampments and caravanseries; news spreads with amazing rapidity, efficiency, and penetration. Even greater news diffusion came with the introduction of the radio, for the cafes and shops turn the volume up and place the radios where the sound will command a maximum audience. Should not the gospel ministry capitalize on this cultural pattern?

The frequent poetic passages in the Old Testament usually do not impress the Westerner nearly as much as they do the Muslim, whose life is steeped in poetic expression. It is integrated in everyday life to such a degree that, for example, ambulant vendors praise their wares in rhymed ditties recited to special tunes. Before I could understand Farsi, the Iranian language, I began to identify the vendors and their wares by their poetic and melodic "commercials." As a pastime, children attending the Quranic schools compete with each other in composing poems, and versification occupies the atten-

tion of people in all walks of life whether they be rich or poor, literate or illiterate.

An example of this comes from my field work in Lavizan, an Iranian village. My wife at times accompanied me, whereupon a prominent senator in the Iranian Maglis (parliament), who possesses a doctoral degree from Columbia University, would entertain her. He would order tea and with much emotion expressively recite poetic passages from the Iranian classics.

Related to their preoccupation with poetry and folklore is the Muslims' consuming interest in a variety of aesthetic traditions. Among Muslims music is a highly individualistic art, for seldom do two performers give the same interpretation to a traditional musical piece, and even the same musician will rarely play or sing a song twice in exactly the same manner. The performer is frequently his own composer; when playing a well-known tune he will inevitably introduce variations and additions of his own according to the moment's mood. The sharply drawn Western distinction between creative artist and performer is absent in the Middle East, where every performance sees the creation of individual variations on the original theme.

Tradition also provides the context for the visual arts, but this context is a broad one in which the individual is permitted his own variations. It is particularly impressive to the Westerner to discover that most everyday handicrafts or products made by Middle Eastern artisans are essentially media for aesthetic expression and possess

artistic qualities. Art is employed to embellish everything, whether it be an object for the rich or for the poor. Any witness to the Muslims who lacks artistic appreciation will do well to acquaint himself with the elementary art perspectives in order to communicate best with these admirers of the beautiful.

### Religion

But undoubtedly the most pervasive characteristic in Middle Eastern culture is the intensive religiosity with its complex elements of belief, ritual, custom, and morality. Though ubiquitous, Middle Eastern religiosity displays considerable variation in content and manifestation. About 95 per cent of the people identify with some sect of Islam, which must not be regarded as a completely unified or monolithic system. Despite their general allegiance to Islam, the people actually incorporate much into their religious practice that antedates Islam, Christianity, or Judaism and that contradicts fundamental Islamic tenets. The masses believe in and propitiate numerous spirits, ghosts, and demons, many of which are associated with natural objects such as plants and animals. Divination and dream interpretation are common. Omens are feared, and there is widespread belief in the "evil eye" which ever threatens man, his products, and his possessions. To counteract its malevolence, the people often use charms and amulets. Seldom do people overtly admire an attractive infant, for doing so attracts misfortune. Flaws are purposely introduced in handiwork to

discourage the "evil eye's" attention. As Donaldson concluded, "Undoubtedly fear of the evil eye exerts the greatest influence of all the superstitions that are common among the people."<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the practice of taking vows and offering sacrifices is widespread, with firm belief in their efficacy. Many of these and similar features are commonly, although erroneously, associated with "animism" rather than popular Islam. They are elements of ancient beliefs and rituals that, for the masses, form the core of Middle Eastern religion over which Islamic doctrine and practice have been superimposed as a veneer. Perhaps Islam is most superficial among the nomads, but most villagers deviate widely from pure Islam also, even though they tend to venerate saints at annual pilgrimages and more or less to observe the "Five Pillars of the Faith" (profession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage).

It must be recognized that the basic religious orientation of Middle Eastern people is more significant than the varieties of doctrines and practices. Life for the villagers and the townspeople, with the exception of the Westernized urban upper classes, is totally pervaded with the supernatural. Religion is the fundamental motivating force on which most cultural traits and behavior rest; religious convictions influence practically every act during each moment in life.

<sup>8</sup>Bess A. Donaldson, *The Wild Rue: A Study of Muhammadan Magic and Folklore in Iran* (London: Luzac & Company, 1938), p. 13.

To appreciate this religious ethos, we have but to compare it with contemporary American life. Clyde Kluckhohn asserted that for the most part Americans are profoundly irreligious.<sup>9</sup> Many are willing to discuss religion seriously, yet basically reject being serious about applying religion to everyday life. By contrast, Muslims observe the traditional forms and rites carefully whether in a formal or informal setting, obviously indicating that religion is an integral phase of daily living. For example, when I was traveling by train from southwestern Iran towards Tehran, the capital, the train stopped near sundown at a small station. The crew delayed resuming the journey until the faithful Muslims completed the appropriate prayers alongside the coaches on their prayer rugs facing Mecca. Can the reader imagine such a delay while using the American transportation system with its emphasis upon schedule? Furthermore, even one without a knowledge of the language need not remain among the villagers long before he becomes aware of the two often repeated utterances, *Mashallah* and *Inshallah*, which in translation mean "What Allah wills" and "If Allah wills."

Religion claims its due even in the secular uses of art, as exemplified by the ever recurring use of Allah's name and Quranic passages to embellish innumerable objects, including tiles and trays, lamps and daggers, vases and plates, which may be made of such diverse materials as glass, clay,

<sup>9</sup>*Mirror for Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949), p. 233.

china, wood, and various metals. Muslim artists and artisans avoid attempting any anthropomorphic representation of Allah since this constitutes idolatry. Thus all customs and traditions have a religious cast, and religion, tradition, and custom form a ubiquitous triad upon which the totality of life rests.

A note of caution may well be inserted here: Let no one think that Islamic religion loftily scorns the material realm, for it does not. Islam has two main concerns held in neat balance: physical well-being in the present world and then adequate spiritual welfare in the afterlife. Allah is expected to dispense material blessings to the faithful in this life. But the deserving who are left in unfortunate circumstances here will be compensated in the next life, where the faithful will enjoy eternal sensual bliss.

Due to the sway religion has over Middle Eastern thinking, feeling, and practice, life with its vicissitudes and disappointments is appraised from a wider angle and a longer-range perspective than the present existence can afford. This earthly journey, with its gains and losses, appears as a mere lower and lesser half of a great totality of existence whose essentials and ultimates lie in the Beyond. The spiritual outlook thus judges from a higher plane beyond the present discomfort, pain, anguish, and privation. Hence the fatalistic composure, the peace of mind, preserved even in the greatest adversities that continually impresses the secularistic Westerner with his contrasting commitment to what Kluckhohn and others have

called "success-optimism"—the pervasive idea that something should and can be done in the present life to alter unfortunate conditions.<sup>10</sup>

Christian witness is more likely to be effective to the extent that the missionary understands these religious features and makes a determined effort to present the Gospel in the light of the Islamic ethos. It is imperative as well that the missionary appreciate the Muslim's intense commitment to supernaturalism. Religion holds the people in a viselike grip and creates a state of mind conducive to intolerance, fanaticism, and cleavages along narrow sectarian lines. As any missionary to Islamic peoples becomes acutely aware, the religious bastion of Islam is extremely difficult to penetrate; Muslims are notorious for the skepticism and prejudice with which they greet alternate views.

### Monotheism

This cursory analysis of Islamic culture in relation to Christian missions would be incomplete without probing at least one major problem contributing to the Muslim's rejection of Christianity—a problem that may constitute the core of Islamic thought and ethos: the issue of monotheism. Eugene A. Nida made an excellent analysis of this issue some years ago, and since the evidence I obtained supports Nida's assertions, we may review his argument.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Corra Du Bois, "The Dominant Value Profile of American Culture," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 57, No. 6 (Dec. 1955), pp. 1232-39.

<sup>11</sup>"Are We Really Monotheists?" *Practical Anthropology*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (March-April 1959), pp. 49-54.

All informed persons know that in theory Muslims are rigid monotheists, which is epitomized in their profession of faith: "There is no God but Allah..." The emphasis on singularity in their philosophical doctrine of God leads them to reject any idea that might suggest or imply polytheism. Consequently, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, immediately conjures up for the Muslim a plurality of gods and leads him to accuse the Christian of polytheism. The conflict is further aggravated by the Christian's correct insistence that Jesus is God's Son. To speak about God having a son is highly repugnant to the Muslim, who erroneously concludes that the Christian is saying that God engaged in sexual relations with a woman, which to him is nothing short of rank blasphemy.

The difficulty in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is readily apparent when efforts are made to explain the difference between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Many Christians' mental image of the Trinity has God as "a venerable Father in the sky." Jesus is considered distinct from God as a person at the Father's right hand. He is viewed as goodness personified and as a culture hero or ideal man standing somewhat in opposition to God in his concern for mankind. The Holy Spirit is frequently viewed as a special, separate, powerful, benevolent Spirit with ephemeral characteristics. To put it briefly, the typical Christian conception of the Trinity is that of separate supernatural beings manifested in

anthropomorphic figures.

This leads to the observation that the basic problem is that truths about the Infinite, about God, must be stated in finite language. To put it another way, we *must* view the ultimate reality of God's being from within our differing cultural perspectives, which in *every* case are limited, imperfect, and distorted. It is humanly impossible to escape using anthropomorphisms, which *always* reflect different cultural contexts and meanings. As a matter of fact, the biblical writers themselves, whether Moses, Isaiah, John, Paul, or any of the others, frequently used figures of speech, i.e., metaphorical descriptives derived from prevailing cultural settings to aid finite man in understanding the infinite God.

If, then, we must accept the premise that finite language and limited cultural concepts necessarily restrict man to a less than absolute understanding of God's person, what is a possible solution to the dilemma inherent in describing the Trinity? How may we escape the charge of polytheism? The simplest and most direct answer is that anthropomorphic figures must be used or linked to God's activities rather than to his form; in other words, biblical terms must be seen in relation to divine functions rather than to form.

For example, it is less meaningful to understand the biblical references to God's throne in heaven as references to a literal seat for a supernatural person than to see that they are metaphors for God's functional role as Supreme Ruler over the universe. Likewise, when Jesus asserted that

"he who has seen me has seen the Father," he referred to functional identity in his attitudes and actions among men rather than to his physical form.

To apply this approach in meeting the Muslim's charge, we need to be frank in admitting that the Bible does not give a literal or systematic description of the Trinity but it has much to say about the functions of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To repeat, it is frustrating and futile to explore the Trinity's form if one assumes it is possible to reduce the Godhead to some kind of literal description. In witnessing to Muslims greater impact will be achieved if one emphasizes what God *does* as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is no guaranteed golden key to success, but it has possibilities for arousing interest and increasing rapport with those who consider Christians to be polytheistic infidels.

### Conclusion

A concluding note may help explain Muslim resistance to the message of God's redeeming love through Christ. Muhammad converted an Arabian tribal organization, whose ethos included absolute devotion to family and tribe, into an enlarged brotherhood linked together by Islam. In Muslim thought, the religious system that emerged is an organism or body which cannot permit severance of organs or members from itself. For a Muslim to accept Christ as Savior means that he is apostate and has been cut off from the body. Islam may actually be a thin veneer covering



ancient and more basic religious ideas as suggested earlier, but, however thin, it has been thoroughly woven into the sacred ties of family, tribe, and society. Hence to deny the faith of one's fathers is to bring upon oneself social ostracism, a much more intolerable condition in a kinship-oriented culture than in the individ-

ualistic West. The complete loyalty demanded by the religion partially explains the cohesiveness of Islam. As J. Christy Wilson aptly writes, "Freedom of religion is an idea foreign to Islam."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Introducing Islam* (Rev. ed.; New York: Friendship Press, 1958), p. 55.

## PA Staff Changes

With this issue we welcome two new members to the PA staff. Mrs. Toby Kambhu replaces as Production Manager Mr. Hatton, who is on furlough. She brings to this responsibility both experience and skill, and we are already grateful for her contribution to the production and mailing of the last three issues. She is also administrative assistant to Dr. William A. Smalley in the United Bible Societies Translations Center in Bangkok.

The second new staff member is Mr. Dwight P. Baker who becomes Assistant Editor. He holds a B.A.

from Grace College and has attended Grace Theological Seminary and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; he has been a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Illinois Chicago Circle campus since September 1970, written a column of reviews for *Eternity Magazine* under the title "Baker's Oven". His chief duty will be to work over from the point of view of style and format manuscripts that require it, and to select the "Siftings" which you will be enjoying in PA beginning with this issue.

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