

Encounter with Folk Islam (1)

“Working for many years in a Muslim country, I have come to the conclusion that the power of Islam does not lie in its dogma and practices, nor in the antithesis of the Trinity against the Lordship of Christ and His redeeming death, but in the occult practices of its leaders, thus holding sway over their people.” So wrote Detmar Scheunemann about his ministry in Indonesia, in **Let the Earth Hear His Voice** page 885, Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975.

A study of the quarterly journal **The Muslim World** since its beginning in 1911 would confirm this view. Many articles from Christian workers in Muslim lands appeared until the late 1930s, eg: -

The cult of saints in Islam

Professor Goldziher. Vol 1, No 3, p 302, July 1911

Popular Islam in Bengal and How to Approach It.

John Takle. Vol 4, No 4, p 379, Oct 1914

Islam and Magic in Egypt

Herbert E E Hayes. Vol 4, No 4, p 396, Oct 1914

Saint Worship in North Africa

E Montet. Vol 3, No 3, p 242, July 1913

The Familiar Spirit or Qarina

S M Zwemer. Vol 6, No 4, p 360, Oct 1916

Animism in Islam (Hair, finger nails and the Hand)

S M Zwemer. Vol 7, No 3, p 245, July 1917

Amulets in Egypt

Vol 7, No 4, p 366, Oct 1917

Animistic Elements in Moslem Prayer

S M Zwemer. Vol 8, No 4, p 358, Oct 1918

Animism in the Creed, and in the use of the Book and the Rosary

S M Zwemer. Vol 10, No 1, p 23, Jan 1919

Superstitions in Algeria

Lilias Trotter. Vol 12, No 4, p 342, Oct 1922

The Whirling and Howling Dervishes

Samuel Anderson. Vol 13, No 2, p181, April 1923

Belief in Jinn among the Persians

Betty Allen Donaldson. Vol 20, No 2, p 185, April 1930

Magic Cures in Popular Islam

James Robson. Vol 24, No 1, p 33, Jan 1934

An Arabic Amulet

W R Taylor. Vol 25, No 2, p61, April 1935

The Koran as Magic

Bess Allen Donaldson. Vol 27, No 3, p255, July 1937

Shrines on the North West Frontier.

Flora Davidson. Vol 36, No 2, p 170, April 1946

Folklore in Islam

A S Tritton. Vol 40, No 3, p167, July 1950

Aspects of the Veneration of Saints in Islam with special reference to Pakistan

M Geijbels. Vol 68, No 3, p 176, July 1978

There are a few other articles by S M Zwemer, but most of the material appears in his book **Animism in Islam** published in 1927. Some may argue that a change in editorial policy in the late 30s and early 40s was the only reason for fewer articles on these subjects; others would say that there was less evidence for folk Islam, especially as education spread to some degree. Others would relate the whole area of folk Islam to mere superstition. It is, therefore, very illuminating to study M Geijbels' article which appeared in 1978. Bill Musk's article on *Popular Islam: The Hunger of the Heart*, published in **The Gospel and Islam: A 1978 Compendium**, is thought provoking. Maybe we need to take a fresh look at popular or folk Islam, and how we share the Gospel with those whose Islam it is.

Musk argues that Islam looks the same the world over but beneath the surface something else emerges. *"In popular Islam the meanings attached to the forms of religious expression are radically different from those understood by Bishop Cragg's muezzin . . ."* Musk speaks of the division between "high" or "ideal" Islam, and "low" or "popular" Islam. One example he gives is that of the doctrine of God's books: *"The doctrine of God's books is turned into bibliomancy and bibliolatry in popular Islam. The Qur'an has the power of a fetish."* Bilquis Sheikh's book **I Dared to Call Him Father** has been widely read. She is a well-educated lady who came to know God as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. She describes how, before her conversion, she sought healing for her grandson. In desperation she called in the local Muslim religious leader. He advised her to read through a certain chapter of Islam as a means for healing. Her story surely illustrates that folk Islam is not just for the uneducated or the poor; that it is not a power of yesterday but a powerful force of today. Often Christian workers have worked from their knowledge of "high" Islam. Maybe they would have been more effective seeking power encounters which would promote a faith-allegiance directly to the Lord Jesus Christ. Musk goes on to say: *"The ordinary Muslim understands the power of the Koran to heal, or the use of the rosary to divine and guide. He needs to discover that Christ can heal, can give power, can defeat demons, can speak supernaturally to man to guide him It is the proposition of this paper that, with popular Islam, a process emanating from power encounter be sought. Christ, in his dealings with the ordinary people around him, tended to free them from the "ideal" religion of the professionals. Why educate ordinary Muslims in their own faith so that Christ can meet them*

there tomorrow, when we can meet them more fundamentally at the point of their felt need today?" (Pages 213, 214)

Maybe it is time for me to quote from my own experience. I have lived in Pakistan for thirty years. For the first eight years of my service in Pakistan I had no experience at all of folk Islam, of the effects of animistic and occult practices and of the opposition of demons. Such matters had not entered into my Western theological studies, nor into my Eastern experience. I was almost totally unprepared for what I found when I spent two months in a Punjabi economic refugee settlement in Thal. I had gone there to learn Punjabi, and to study village customs and superstitions. I found myself involved in a mini-revival. The new village was mostly made up of Christian settlers from the Gojra area who had accepted the government's offer of land for economically deprived people.

There were about eighty families in the village. With their own hands they had built the village including their mud and timber church. During the summer of 1962 the Holy Spirit of God brought many of these nominal Christians into a new experience of the power and presence of Christ. They gathered for worship and prayer every night in a different home. Satanic forces also manifested themselves – inexplicable blood stains, sudden fears, the nightmarish and palpable presence of evil. Some, not changed by the revival, practised black and white magic. I was aware of the cosmic encounter of good and evil which goes on around us all the time. Here were these principalities and powers over which Christ had triumphed in His Cross (Colossians 2 v 15). From here on I started to reflect on the influence of animism on both the Christian and Muslim communities, and on the influence of the Muslim community on the Christians.

The following year I spent two and a half months in the Rahim Yar Khan district in villages where Christians and Muslims live side by side but where the majority was nearly always Muslim. Again we saw the power of God demonstrated in powerful ways, so that spiritual matters were the talk of the area. Again Satan displayed his powers. If one tried to rationalise some of the experiences I have already mentioned, one would be hard put to explain apart from demonic supernatural powers the conflict into which several of us were plunged as we sought to preach the gospel of Christ in the villages of the Rahim Yar Khan area. Some local Muslim religious practitioners tried to use their magic to drive us out of the village where we had made our base. The power encounter that followed attracted hundreds of Muslims to come under cover of darkness to listen to the Christian services each night. 1962 and 1963 may seem a long time ago, but from then on, in different places and different countries, I have been thrust into power encounter situations. This has led me to listen more carefully to what some of the locals are saying, and to try to find out what really goes on and is the focus of interest of so many people. All this leads to a study of folk Christianity and folk Islam.

It may be significant that the Christian publishing house in Lahore, Pakistan, realising the need in this area, commissioned me to write a book on this subject. This is the first book in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, describing the principles of spiritual warfare against Satan and his hosts, and giving practical guidance to believers. Spiritual warfare does not only concern

believers, but has a bearing on power encounters, and so on our witness to Muslim friends. It seemed to me and to the publishing house that there was a need for a practical handbook describing Biblical teaching and applying it. If this is so greatly needed in one Muslim country, maybe it is also needed in others. We need practical answers to such questions as:-

- How do we know if someone is demonised or not?
- If so, what can be done about it?
- Can a house be inhabited by evil spirits?
- If so, what needs to be done to cleanse it?
- How does one distinguish between what comes from human perversity and what is directly satanic?
- Where does superstition end and the demonic begin?
- How does one distinguish between mental illness and satanic obsession, depression, oppression and possession?
- What underlying animistic practices affect the Christian community in Pakistan?
- Why do Christians visit Muslim Pirs or saints?
- How great is the hold of folk Islam on the Muslim community?
- How does “folk” or “popular” Islam affect the church and its ministry?
- How should the church respond creatively to the challenge of folk Islam?
- How can Christ’s victory over evil be manifested through His church?
- Are there special prayers, scriptures and services that could help us in this warfare?
- When God delivers people from the bondage of Satan, what teaching should be given to them so that they know how to stand in the evil day? (Ephesians 6 vv 10-18)

Some will not consider a treatment of these matters particularly relevant to evangelism among Muslims. I would claim it is as relevant as was Elijah’s confrontation with the priests of Ba’al. Some will class much of what I describe here and in my book as superstition for which the cure is more education and Biblical teaching. Others would hold a certain kind of dispensational view of the Bible, which relegates all such power encounters to the first century of the Christian era. Others are so influenced by Western secular and “scientific” thinking that they do not consider the subject relevant to the twentieth century. To those who hold these views I would point out that on more than one occasion Christ commanded His followers to suspend judgement. I invite all who doubt the relevance of this subject to suspend their preconceived ideas, prejudices and disbelief, and carefully and prayerfully, with the Bible in hand, rethink the subject.

At the present moment we are getting a clear definition of folk or popular Islam from the modern, rigorous conservatives, especially from the Wahabi movement which originated in Saudi Arabia in the 18th century. The movement, backed by oil wealth, is extremely influential at the present time. The founder, Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1704 – 1792) *“was a rigorist after the example of the famous Ibn Taimiyyah (d. 1328), who disallowed all innovation, pilgrimage to shrines, saint worship, the cult of intercession, and other accretions which had come into popular Islam through the influence of Sufism”* (Kenneth Cragg in **The House of Islam** p. 116). In Egypt and the Middle East Arabic speaking world the Muslim Brotherhood, and in the Indian

sub-continent the Jama'at-i-Islami groups are the modern adaptations of Arabian Wahhabism. Despite these reform movements, popular or folk Islam continues to be the Islam that many people know. It meets their sense of need. To quote Bill Musk again: *"In modern Beirut, amulet makers and fortune tellers make good livings from their crafts. From headache to demon-possession, from love potion to astral travel, the ordinary Muslim often depends for his very life, and certainly for his healing and help against his enemies, on a local religious practitioner. These men and women have real power."* (**The Gospel and Islam** p 212)

Again and again in the Acts of the Apostles the power of the living God was seen. There were power encounters between religious professionals and the disciples of Jesus (Acts 4 vv 1-4); between Herod the king and church members (Acts 12); between Elymas the magician and Paul the apostle (Acts 13 vv 4-12); between the owners of a girl who had a spirit of divination backed by the city authorities and Paul and Silas (Acts 16 vv 16-40); between the itinerant Jewish exorcists and Paul; between Diana of the Ephesians with her followers and the disciples of Jesus Christ the Lord (Acts 19). In these encounters the power of Jesus Christ was demonstrated and attention was focussed on Him. They were the prelude to, and the means of, evangelism and proclamation.

How does all this work out today, especially in relation to ministry among Muslims? It might be in order to give some case histories. Sometimes a building is so invaded and affected by evil powers that a radical cleansing in the name of Jesus Christ is needed. In Saudi Arabia I was once the guest for dinner of a Christian Pakistani couple and their two small children. They lived in Riyadh, the capital, for several years and had all kept fit and well. A few months previous to my visit they had moved to their present house, and had all been sick off and on. The little girl was especially unwell. My host and hostess asked me what I thought about the situation. I replied that the sickness could be due to natural causes like a contaminated water supply or that it might have a satanic origin due to evil powers inhabiting the house. At this one of the other guests laughed, and I knew I could not proceed to explain more. I promised to pray for the family. I shared the problem with the couple with whom I was staying and we specifically prayed for healing and for the Lord's victory to be evident. Unexpectedly, I visited the home the next day. The scoffer was not present. The little girl was still ill. I suggested to the parents and the three other visitors that we should join together as a team and pray for cleansing in each room of the house. Accordingly, we went from room to room and prayed for the casting out of evil and for cleansing through the blood of Christ. We then praised God and prayed for those who used the particular room and for its special uses. For example, in the kitchen we prayed for the one who cooked, and for those who ate the food.

A Muslim neighbour visited the house a few hours after this service had taken place. She exclaimed in astonishment *"Your little girl is now well, and your home has a different atmosphere. What has happened?"* The lady of the house told her of the power of Jesus Christ and how a group of believers had prayed in His name and that all evil had been expelled. This proved an effective and convincing way to share with her the good news of Jesus' victory over sin and evil.