

# Strategy for Mission Among the Fulbe (part one)

*A strategy for Christian witness among the Fulbe must take into account three challenges: the requirement of building a history of witness among them, the tightly interwoven and distinctive character of their culture built upon nomadic pastoralism, and worldview divergences between Christianity and Islam.*

by Larry Vanderaa

I grew up with Fulbe in Nigeria. My parents were missionaries among the Tiv people, but as everywhere in West Africa, there were always the Fulbe. I didn't know any Fulbe personally that I remember, but one could not escape noticing these mysterious people that appeared out of the bush with their cattle and calabashes of milk, and then mysteriously disappeared. My mother used to buy eggs from the Fulbe women and I would watch as the eggs were counted out, money was exchanged, all this amidst a cloud of flies, drawn by the smell of souring milk and a faint barnyard smell. One day I decided I would find these Fulbe. I rode my bike deep into the bush behind our compound, but only found a faint clearing covered with dried cow dung. The Fulbe had melted away.

Such were my memories of the Fulbe. Such were more or less the impressions of the Fulbe held by most missionaries of that period. The Fulbe were considered to be mysterious wanderers, aimlessly moving from here to there in search of ever better pastures for their cattle and thus impossible to evangelize. How does one plant a church among nomads, Muslim nomads, no less? And so the Fulbe were largely ignored by the missions. A few scattered attempts were made; Mali is a case in point. In the early 1930s, when the Christian and Missionary Alliance were just getting underway in Mali, they posted a few missionaries to the Fulbe. Some Scriptures were translated, there was even one conversion. But soon the missionaries were reposted to the more responsive Dogon. Today there are over 35,000 Dogon Christians. If we count generously, we may find 40 Fulbe Christians in Mali. But we cannot fault these early missionaries. We would have done the same thing. The Dogon were ready to turn to Christ, the Fulbe were not, and resources were limited.

My reflections on strategy for mission among the Fulbe falls into four parts: challenges which form the backdrop against which Fulbe evangelism is carried out, a discussion of strategy, our style of gospel presentation, and discipleship. I conclude with our job description document for an evangelist in Mali.

## The First Challenge: The History Factor

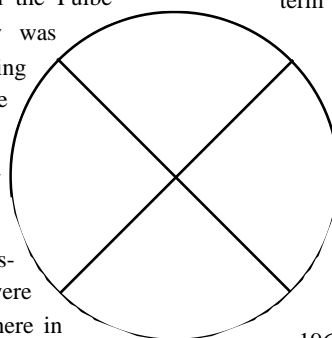
This leads us into our first challenge to Fulbe evangelism: there is not a long history of mission work among the Fulbe on which to build. The history of missions among the

Fulbe can be divided into three 25 year periods: 1925 to 1950, 1950 to 1975, and 1975 to the present. During the first period, there were only two long-term efforts that I know of. The

first was by a Christian and Missionary Alliance couple, the Watkins, in Guinea. They began their work in 1923 and continued faithfully for 44 years until most missionaries were expelled from Guinea in 1967. They translated much of

the New Testament but saw virtually no fruit on their labor. However, missionaries now working in the area report that many of the new converts tell of they or their parents having been influenced by this faithful missionary couple and their children.

A second effort was begun among the Fulakunda Fulbe in 1936 in Velingara, Senegal, by missionaries from WEC International. A series of missionary families tirelessly preached in many of the surrounding villages until the mid-1970s. In spite of their efforts, there were no converts until 1974 when one young man came to Christ and he soon moved out of the area. However, today there is a growing church of Fulbe in



Velingara and increasing interest is being shown in the surrounding villages.

During the second period, from 1950 to 1975, church planting efforts were started by SIM in Nigeria and Benin, the Assemblies of God in Benin, the Lutherans in Cameroon, and in 1970 by SIM in Niger. It is interesting to note that it is these older church planting efforts that are seeing the most response to their work. In Benin there are more than 2000 Fulbe Christians, although it must be noted that these Fulbe were never Islamized, making this a unique case. In Niger the SIM baptized more than 60 Fulbe four years ago.

During the third period, from 1975 to the present, the Spirit moved a number of missions to post missionaries to the Fulbe, especially during the 10 year period from 1975 to 1985. The Lutherans began in Senegal in 1976, SIM expanded into new areas of Burkina Faso in 1979 and again in 1983, and the Assemblies of God posted one couple to Burkina in 1980. In Mali,

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which I know the best, the CMA re-posted missionaries to the Fulbe in 1984, our mission—Christian Reformed World Missions—began work in 1984, the Norwegian Lutherans began in 1985. In Guinea CRWM began work in 1985 along with the CMA and WEC in the late 1980s. More recent efforts have been begun by Cornerstone in Mali in 1992, the Santal mission in Mali in about 1993, and there are others. It is interesting to note again that the missions which began work in this period are all producing pretty much the same results. Everyone can speak of some conversions, but there are few baptisms. There are no churches, but much interest, and much coming and going of seekers.

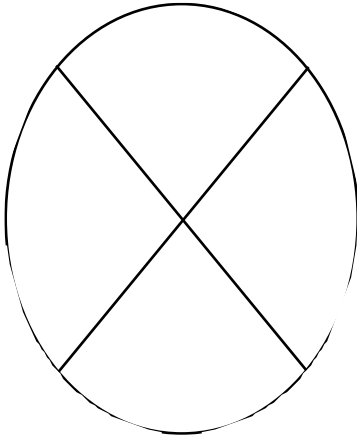
This brief historical survey reveals that there is a consistent progression in the rate of success: the older the effort, the more developed are the results (as counted in terms of conversions and churches planted). Time, that is sufficient time, seems to be a significant factor for church planting in Africa. One example: it is always said regarding the work among the Tiv people in Nigeria, “25 years, 25 converts.” Work was started in 1911 and 25 years later in 1936 there were just 25 converts. However, in the next 25 years, by 1961, these 25 converts had swelled to a Christian community of over 180,000. We always hope in the depths of our hearts that somehow our situation will be different, that we will be able to skip over those first 25 years, but it appears the Fulbe will not be an exception.

The problem in mission literature and publicity is that we repeatedly hear about the second 25 years, but only rarely about the first 25 years. In time we will hear about explosive church growth among the Fulbe in Guinea, but we will not hear much about Harry Watkins and his wife’s 44 year long sacrifice of love. The harvest is always preceded by a lot of hard work. The exceptions to this always make the news and thus build false impressions and hopes. The exceptions are exciting because there are often people movements accompanied by signs and wonders of the Spirit. But we must remember that these are exceptions, not the rule. As yet we do not anywhere see any evidence of that type of movement of the Spirit among the Fulbe. For whatever reason, it appears that the Spirit, at least for now, is building the church among the Fulbe in a manner consistent with the history of mission work in Africa: deliberately, laying the foundation brick by brick over time. Thus in Fulbe evangelism, by and large we are in the first 25 years. Work among the Fulbe is not for the faint hearted, the easily discouraged. We must not weary in well-doing (Heb 12:3).

I have noticed over the years, and this has been my personal experience too, when we missionaries begin a new work, we tend to latch onto encouraging signs and send hope filled prayer letters to the churches and positive reports back to the home office. But in the end, much of this in retrospect looks like grasping at straws. After some years when there are no results, we become discouraged. Some of us return to our homelands. Some of us look for greener pastures and the cycle begins once again.

Jesus’ remarks in John 4:34-38 are very instructive. The context here is that Jesus has just finished talking with the Samaritan woman at the well. We love to quote verse 35: “I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”

We do not like to hear the underlying message of verses 37-38: “Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.”



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Whenever we see large numbers of unsaved people, we assume that these are the fields “ripe for harvest.” But according to Jesus this may not be the case. Fields are only “ripe for harvest” when someone has done the hard work to prepare the fields. In this case in John, Jesus is referring to 1500 years since Abraham of toil and sacrifice by prophets, godly kings, and priestly service. In the case of the Fulbe, we are those being called to faithfully do the plowing and sowing. Others will likely reap the harvest.

What are the implications of this challenge for church planting? It simply means that there are no short-cuts, no magic bullets, no substitutes for getting to know Fulbe one by one, exposing them to Christians and to Christ, sometimes at great personal sacrifice.

## Second Challenge: The Culture Factor

The second challenge is Fulbe culture. Much could be said about Fulbe culture, about population, demographics, cattle herding, nomadism, and of course pulaaku. Some like to discuss theories of their origins or their various names—Fulani, Fulbe, Peul, Fula, etc.—or their language—Fulfulde or Pulaar. However, since this is not a paper on Fulbe culture, I would just like to note a few distinctive features of Fulbe culture that may have bearing on church planting. I will comment on four: identity, independence, non-entanglement, and self-discipline.

1. *Identity.* The Fulbe are very proud of their language and culture. It may seem like this could be said of any people group, but with the Fulbe, as with the French, there is an extra degree of pride in culture and language. And the Fulbe have a right to be proud since they have developed a unique lifestyle and culture that has permitted them to sustain life in a very difficult physical environment. They are proud of their accomplishments and they are proud of who they are. They are the Fulbe, the conquerors of the Sahel, conquering both its physical hardships and its peoples. They are the descendants of the proud, fearless, warriors that rode out over the Sahel in the past centuries conquering all of the Sahel from Dakar to Kano in the name of Islam. They are the great missionaries of Islam, the aristocrats of the Sahel. They submit to no one but Allah.

This is all part of their identity, an identity that goes beyond blood inheritance. A Pullo isn't a Pullo just because he has Fulbe blood in him, he is a Pullo because of what he becomes. For example, in Mali there are the so-called “lost” Fulbe. Nearly every Bambara village in Mali has people with the last name of Sidiŷe. They are Fulbe

who traditionally herded cattle for the Bambara but no longer speak Fulfulde and have adapted to Bambara culture. Most Fulbe would not consider them to be Fulbe even though they are Fulbe by blood. Further, there are four ethnic groups in Mali who were once Fulbe but have now been integrated into the Bambara family both linguistically and culturally—the Kassonke, the Fulanke, the Wassulunke, and the Bamana Fula. The Fulbe would not consider them to be Fulbe.

By contrast, there is another group of Fulbe near Segou that used to herd cattle for the kings of the Segou kingdom. They no longer speak Fulfulde, only Bambara, but they continue to herd cattle and generally live culturally as Fulbe. Most Fulbe would consider them to be Fulbe.

I have also known a couple former-slave class Fulbe who have tried to take on Fulbe lifestyle and culture and assimilate themselves into the former-noble class Fulbe. In both cases the Fulbe powerfully denounced and shamed these men, rejecting their bid.

Pullo-ness is partly inherited, partly learned. It's in the blood, but it is also a lifestyle, a culture, a heritage, all of which together forms their identity. The Fulbe are unique, they know it, and are proud of it.

*What are the implications of this for church planting?* The Fulbe will reject any new system or religion that would require them to deny their heritage or their identity or significantly alter their culture. It is imperative that their culture and their identity be affirmed in Jesus' name. Only as this is done will the Fulbe consider belief in Jesus a viable option. Fulbe culture is not perfect; there will have to be some transformation. But it can be affirmed; it can be redeemed. Being Muslim is an integral part of their identity and culture, but we cannot affirm Islam. The offense of the gospel cannot be avoided, but we must focus our message so the only stumbling block is our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.

2. *Independence.* From birth, Fulbe are trained to be more independent than are members of other ethnic groups in Africa. A Bambara, for example, is trained to depend on the family, the village counsel, and the village chief for decisions. A Pullo, by contrast, may spend days and weeks on his own with the cattle, moving them from location to location in search of pastures. He must be able to make decisions on his own, quickly and efficiently. Thus a Pullo is trained from childhood to be more independent. This independent

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spirit is reflected in Fulbe political structures. Traditionally the family head is the highest level of organization. Village counsels and chiefs are weak, and there are certainly no paramount chiefs or clan chiefs. The only power center that is able to bring the Fulbe together for common action are the religious leaders, the marabouts. For example, in the late 1700s and 1800s the Fulbe built three Muslim states that ruled the Sahel. The three were the Sokoto kingdom of Usman dan Fodio, the Massina kingdom of Seeku Aamadou, and the kingdom of Umar Tal who conquered much of modern day Guinea, Senegal, and Mali. All three were powerful marabouts who ruled their kingdoms in the name of religion. I have also observed this phenomenon in our village: it seems the Fulbe will only work for the common good when religious affairs are involved—such as repairing a mosque—or when a powerful marabout calls for common action. Otherwise all efforts at community action seem doomed to failure.<sup>1</sup>

I should add, though, that all of this is relative. Fulbe are still more like other Africans than they are like Europeans or Americans in this regard. They are still highly committed to carrying out family obligations and suppressing individual desires, a weak character trait among Americans, to say the least. But within certain parameters, Fulbe exhibit more tendencies towards independence and independent thinking than do members of other ethnic groups in Africa.

*What are the implications of this for church planting?* Unity in the church will be difficult to maintain because there will be an instinctive resistance to church authority. Unity will depend on the ability and power of individual religious leaders to unite the Christians. This problem will likely be especially acute during the early years when powerful leaders have not yet emerged. On the positive side, Fulbe Christians will likely be dynamic, independent evangelists, and free-thinking theologians. In my travels I have observed on more than one occasion where the president of a denomination is a Pullo, even though there may be only a few Fulbe Christians in a denomination otherwise dominated by another ethnic group.

3. *Non-Entanglement.* There is another aspect of the Fulbe's tendency towards independence: it leads them to an aversion for entanglements, that is any sort of entanglement that would limit their ability to respond quickly to the needs of their cattle. Thus they exhibit an aversion to an over-abundance of property, to permanent housing, and to political structures. In some of the more extreme cases, there seems to be even a reluctance to developing close friendships. All of this serves to keep the Fulbe free of entanglements, free to go at any moment for the welfare of the cattle. This may seem like an extreme sacrifice, too high a price to pay, but one must remember that the cattle are their livelihood, their lifeline, their field, their salary. Traditionally, a Pullo without cattle is in deep trouble. Thus the felt need for survival has over the centuries shaped Fulbe culture in profound ways. Today most aspects of this culture are still intact in the personalities of the Fulbe, even though many Fulbe no longer herd cattle and are no longer nomadic. This can sometimes set them at odds with the peoples around them.

*What are the implications of this aspect of their independence for church planting?* In Mali we are beginning to suspect that new Fulbe Christians will be reticent to develop Christian church structures, weekly programs, and the like. They will find this restrictive, even dangerous, and will resist such entanglements. One may raise the objection that they have, however, accepted Muslim entanglements. But if one reflects on Islam, one realizes that even though they talk of umma, or brotherhood, Islam is practiced individually. Muslims may gather together for prayer, but each

person goes through the ritual as an individual and departs for his home. He is also free to practice the essential rituals of Islam, salat and fasting, alone, far from home and village. In Christianity, expectations of community and shared worship are higher. There is much more structure to maintain, at least as we have developed Christianity in the West. New Fulbe Christians will find this burdensome and dangerous to their welfare. New Fulbe Christians will need to be free to develop creative church structures and worship patterns that will be in harmony with their ethic of “traveling light” which is so deeply ingrained in the Fulbe, even in those who are no longer nomadic.

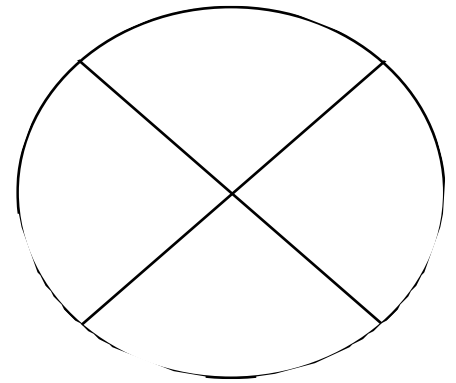
4. *Self-discipline.* To maintain their nomadic, cattle herding lifestyle, the Fulbe have developed a number of coping mechanism which form the heart of what is often called *pulaaku*. The basic elements of *pulaaku* are independence and self-discipline. We have already talked about their independence. Their self-discipline is almost legendary and is shown in their complete public control of their emotions and their high tolerance for pain. For example, I had a close friend, an older man, who heard in the market that his teenage son had unexpectedly died in a distant village. He returned from the market, visited briefly, and left for this distant village. Ten minutes after he departed I learned of his loss. There had been nothing in his comportment to betray the emotions that must have been raging inside. The men also pride themselves in being able to not eat or drink for long periods of time. I have noticed that parents seem to take pleasure in, rather than worry about, their young sons when they are petulant and refuse to eat. As adults, our Fulbe will neither eat nor drink in front of people who are not close relatives or members of the former-slave class. This is seen as part of their *pulaaku*, their culture, but it also serves a very practical end: to test and develop their self-discipline. If this practice is viewed apart from their cattle herding lifestyle, it appears to be excessively prideful, even silly. But if one reflects on the rigors of herding cattle in the Sahelian environment—herders are often alone, far from villages, 50<sup>o</sup> centigrade heat—one can understand why such skills would be highly valued. Since they have been given cultural value, each generation automatically learns this important survival skill.

*Pulaaku* also places high value on intelligence, cleverness, and wisdom; on dignity, propriety, and reserve. The ideal Pullo is a quiet, austere aristocrat, never showing excessive joy or sorrow.

*What are the implications of pulaaku for church planting?* There will be a strong preference for reserve, decorum, and dignity in worship. For example, the men in our area do not sing. This is considered frivolous, an activity for women, children, and the griots. *Pulaaku* also requires a tight control of the emotions of joy, grief, and anguish. For example, in the Jesus film, when Jesus is nailed to the cross, in the Massina Fulfulde version Jesus does not cry out but only sighs. An audible cry would indicate weakness and a breach of *pulaaku*. It is also clear that where *pulaaku* is strong, Christian celebration of the sacrament of communion is going to be quite revolutionary. It will require the Pullo to reexamine who really are one’s *sakiraa*¥e, one’s family.

### Third Challenge: The Religion Factor

There is another aspect of Fulbe identity that we only touched on briefly above, and that is Islam. To be a Pullo is to be a Muslim. It is difficult for a Pullo to separate the two in his mind. They have melded into one: a seemingly perfect fit.



It is not difficult to understand why Islam has been successful among the Fulbe. Just as Fulbe pride in identity, independence, non-entanglement, and self-discipline have implications for church planting, so too they had implications for Islamization. Consider the following:

1. In Islam, buildings are unnecessary—put a few stones in a circle and smooth the sand, and one has a mosque for prayer.
2. As to “mosque polity,” Islam is flexible, light, easy to carry around. Weekly meetings are not required. Mosque government is almost non-existent, and further, each mosque is a congregation unto itself. There is no need for submission to or entanglements in heavy leadership hierarchies.
3. The Ramadan fast and the five daily prayers appeal to the self-disciplined nature of the Fulbe. These activities are consistent with *pulaaku*.
4. Islam has required few, if any, changes in Fulbe lifestyle, culture, and worldview.
5. Arabic is required, but at the same time it provided its script for the writing down of Fulfulde.<sup>2</sup>

But the appeal of Islam goes even deeper. The worldview of African Traditional Religion, and thus Fulbe Traditional Religion, and the basic worldview of Islam are one and the same. Both are animistic at the core which means that

there are only superficial divisions between the natural world and the spiritual world. There is natural observable reality, but it is possessed by spiritual powers. Some of these powers are part of physical reality itself, some come from "Beyond," a sort of middle kingdom where spirits, jinn, and other spiritual powers exist. They can come in and out of natural reality with impunity. However, despite appearances, African Traditional Religion is monotheistic. There is a High God, the Creator, the ruler over all, the arbiter of fate. The Fulbe traditionally call him *Laamfo* or *Genno*. But he is distant, enigmatic, and uninvolved in his creation. Many have Fall of Man myths which explain how this occurred.

In Islam, Allah is also distant and isolated from his creation. He is transcendent, abiding in his own sphere of reality. Prayers are directed his way because he holds the keys to eternal life, but for day-to-day problems, most Fulbe prefer to go to the marabouts through whom they seek protective *talki* power from the jinn, and so forth. Another similar characteristic of Islam and African Traditional Religion is that in both views God and the spiritual beings are morally neutral; that is, they are neither purely good nor purely evil. They are fickle, ever changing.<sup>3</sup> Neither *Laamfo* nor Allah have established an abstract, unchanging, moral law which governs creation and the affairs of mankind.

Thus the universe is a fearsome, unstable place. Men and women struggle to eke out a living on the earth while attempting to maintain harmony and balance with the cosmic forces so as to ensure good luck, good health, good crops. People can create imbalance and disharmony in two ways: through serious sin (murder, incest, witchcraft) or through the disruption of standard accepted procedures, such as changes in how one herds or plows or plants or

prays. The safest course is to never change anything, never experiment. Thus African Traditional Religion and Islam are conserving, or conservative, in their character. Nothing really changes for centuries.

The Fulbe found that Islam meshed with their worldview, culture, and lifestyle. It just added one thing: It introduced worship of the Creator God, the High God, who gives hope of eternal life. Where African Traditional Religion ignored the High God and had only vague notions of the afterlife, Islam came in and said, "We can show you how to worship *Laamfo*, his name is Allah, and he is the sole guarantor of eternal life." Thus Islam did African Traditional Religion a favor by filling in the vaguely understood "upper story" of religion while leaving much of the "lower story" intact.<sup>4</sup>

If the Fulbe slipped easily into Islam, can they as easily slip into Christianity? I want to answer yes. I want to believe that somehow and in some way God leaves his witness in every culture, worldview, and religion. I want to believe that the essentials of the gospel can be communicated without compromise into any worldview. Actually, I do believe these things to be true. However, just as the Jews in the time of Jesus looked straight at Jesus and turned away in unbelief, so the Muslims look straight at Jesus and alter his message and identity (see John 8:43-44).

### Religious Hindrances to Fulbe Evangelism

There are several hindrances to communication of the gospel to Fulbe. I will mention hindrances raised by differences in worldview and by differences arising from the teaching of Islam itself.

1. Biblical worldview is different from the worldview we have described above. Just to point out one glaring difference: in the Bible there is a clear delineation between good and evil, between good beings and evil beings. The God of the Bible is wholly good and perfect, he does not create evil or have anything to do with evil. This has all sorts of implications for absolute law, just judgment, the keeping of promises, God's changelessness, and our implicit trust in his goodness which leads to contentment, well-being, and assurance of salvation.<sup>5</sup> The Satan of the Bible is wholly evil; thus the battle lines are clearly drawn.

The implication for Fulbe evangelism is this: we will want to condemn their dependence on *talki* and magic and their manipulation of the jinn as evil, inspired by Satan. For Christians this is clearly evil. For the Fulbe many of these things are merely ambiguous, neither good nor bad, even provided by God for those who have the cleverness to manage such powers.

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The chronological storytelling method that is used by many missionaries these days is basically an attempt to shift worldview, to create a new paradigm, so that the gospel can be shared and hopefully understood in the light of the new worldview. Below we will go more deeply into the implications of worldview on evangelism.

2. A second area of differences are the teachings of Islam itself. These can be seen on two levels: on the surface there are certain arguments and objections which are repeatedly thrown at Christians such as questions about the Trinity, the fact that Jesus in the Qur'an predicts another prophet who will follow him, the assertion of the Qur'an that Jesus didn't die, and the accusation that Christians changed their Scriptures. But on a second level, there are certain beliefs and assumptions that all Muslims make which underlie these surface arguments and which are ultimately more difficult to deal with. These assumptions are usually not articulated by the average Muslim. They can be divided up into what I call the six S's: *shirk*, sin, savior, salvation, sacrifice, and Scripture. Just a brief comment on each:

a. *Shirk*. This is the Arabic term for the sin of associating any created thing with Allah. At first blush this may seem like a minor issue, but it is this belief that precludes Muslims from accepting the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In fact, nearly all differences between Christianity and Islam can ultimately be traced to the difference between God and Allah. It seems wise to me that Christians use another word for God if such options exist, such as *Laamfo* in Massina Fulfulde. In African Traditional Religion the problem is usually an incomplete conception of God which leaves Christians free to add content, while in Islam the fundamental perception of God's character clashes with the Christian view of God.

The Muslim view is rooted in the notion of *shirk*. In its effort to glorify and exalt Allah, to magnify his power and position, the Allah of Islam becomes so transcendent that he can in no way be related to any known thing in creation. He is an unknowable Other. He will not even be present in *alijenna*. Further Allah is totally free: he can abrogate his will, he makes no promises, and he is morally free or neutral. His real character and qualities are unknown. Human emotions and qualities cannot be ascribed to him. Thus when we say God is compassionate, a classical Muslim will say that we cannot really know what that means since Allah's conception of compassion may be different from ours.

A Muslim cannot in any way conceive of the God described in Hebrews 1:3, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being ..." or Hebrews 2:14-15, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity..." We often do not fully appreciate what we have in our God: majestic and all-powerful, and yet taking on humanity and living right among us (Psalm 113:5-6). But our perception of God so completely permeates our life and our presentations of the gospel that we talk right past the Fulbe. What the *Linjiila* says Jesus did, said, and claimed for himself does not square with their view of Allah; Allah would not, even could not, act that way. We even appear to blaspheme God.<sup>6</sup>

b. *Sin*. Sin is a uniquely Christian problem. Every other religion in the world minimizes it in some way. Muslims will readily agree that there is an unbridgeable gulf between man and Allah, but it is not caused by man's sin but rather Allah's transcendence. The reason for this light view of sin in Islam is four fold:

First, Muslim Fulbe divide sin into three categories: *lutti* which are violations of religious or ritual law, *junuubuuji* which are sins against moral law, and *hakkeeki* which

are basically social errors. Since, as we will see in the next section below, salvation in Islam comes from following ritual law as revealed in the Qur'an (the five pillars), Fulbe place great importance on violations of ritual law but far less importance on sins against moral law.<sup>7</sup> Christianity, on the other hand, places almost no importance on ritual law and great importance on moral law, following Jesus' lead in the New Testament.

Second, Muslims recognize that human beings sin, but do not accept the fact of original sin, our sinful nature, our total depravity. Human beings are born perfect and only make mistakes, or sin against moral law, out of ignorance or weakness. These "mistakes" are corrected by seeking forgiveness from the offended party and by performing the appropriate ablutions, incantations, fastings, or prayers.

Third, Allah is not generally described as Holy. In fact he is morally neutral, the author of both good and evil. Strict Muslims will say that Allah literally creates all the acts of men as they do them, even their evil actions. So how can men be held responsible?

Fourth, how does one feel sin when Allah is not a person and more a raw power source? New converts will only understand sin as God's character takes on shape—that he is holy and just in a knowable sense. They will only feel remorse for sin as Jesus becomes personal and there is a sense of grieving a loving Savior, a personal friend. I suspect that many new converts will only initially feel a need to repent of their sin of rejecting God's Son. The rest will come later.

There is, however, within Islam concern about being ritually unclean before God. One becomes unclean, or ritually unacceptable, by touching certain body

secretions, engaging in sexual activity, being urinated on by one's child, and so forth. Being in a state of ritual uncleanness is not in and of itself evil, it happens to everyone every day, but one must be made ritually clean through ablutions before engaging in worship of Allah.<sup>8</sup> It has been proposed that this may be a bridge for Muslims to gain an understanding of the seriousness of sin, but further research needs to be done. Parallels could be drawn but the concept of uncleanness would need to be expanded to include all categories of sin.<sup>9</sup>

c. *Salvation.* In Islam there is no real need for salvation in a Christian sense. Man and creation are not corrupted and existing in a state of permanent judgment. There is no need for salvation from certain condemnation. However, man is weak and makes mistakes and his future is uncertain. Allah in his mercy has revealed in the Qur'an what pleases him, that is, what is his will, primarily his will regarding ritual, or religious duties, which are the five pillars of Islam. This is the salvation offered by Allah. In keeping this will, one honors the salvation from Allah and enhances one's chances of pleasing Allah on the judgment day. Thus, the revelation of Allah's will is sufficient to save mankind. No further action needs to be taken. Human being's only suffer from ignorance of or feeble application of that will.

It is my impression that the average Pullo in our village is not concerned about nor often even aware of the theology behind the practice of Islam. It is enough that Allah has commanded it; that violations of this "salvation" are not easily forgiven; that this is the way it has always been done; that there is no other hope. Having said that, it must also be noted that the average Muslim can also become quite exercised about what appear to be minute details of practice. For example, does one begin

prayer with upraised arms or crossed arms? Was the moon really properly observed so that Ramadan can end tomorrow? These discussions may sound trite to us, but we must remember that a Muslim is here debating the essentials of his salvation. This type of discussion is on a level with whether or not Jesus rose from the dead. These are questions of eternal consequence.

*(Continues on page 46)*

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