

Book Reviews

Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: Exploring a New Path Between Two Faiths by Paul-Gordon Chandler (Plymouth, England: Cowley Publications 2007)

—reviewed by Leith Gray



What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? This is a question that has occupied many theologians, historians and missiologists.

Rather than trying to answer this question with a tome of propositions and arguments, dislodged from the question's situatedness in everyday life, Paul-Gordon Chandler responds by painting a picture of the life of one disciple.

The central motivation driving Paul-Gordon Chandler in his book *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road* is to guide us as pilgrims on the way of a new paradigm. Some call it the "insider" paradigm, others speak of "C5" churches, and still others use the term "incarnational witness." Chandler describes the failure of the traditional "conflict of religions" model of presenting Christ to Muslims and presents a new and more Biblical approach to living and proclaiming faith in Jesus. He chooses to do so, however, in a most attractive way: by showing us the shift from the old paradigm to the new in the life of Mazhar Mallouhi. Nevertheless, Chandler warns us

that we should not read his book simply as a biography, saying in the words of Kenneth Cragg that biography is "the first clue to theology" (p. 7).

Chandler, an American Episcopal minister who from childhood has lived and worked among Muslims, tells how he was gripped several years ago by E. Stanley Jones' work, *The Christ of the Indian Road*. Even as he read it, he wondered how this incarnational kind of discipleship to Jesus might work itself out among Muslims rather than Hindus. Chandler felt that Jones was right in his assertion that "Christianity" was "breaking out beyond the borders of the Christian Church" and that "in a spiritual movement like that of Jesus... it is impossible to mark its frontiers" (p. 3). As Chandler began to research this new paradigm, he examined the incarnational witness of Sadhu Sundar Singh, an Indian believer of Sikh culture, who lived in the early decades of the 20th Century. Then in 1993 he crossed paths with Mazhar Mallouhi of Syria, who is the focus of this book.

Although Chandler does not intend for his work to be merely a biography, in section one of the book, "Pilgrim of Allah: Devotion to Christ within the Line of Muhammad," he sketches an overview of Mallouhi's life, as a framework for understanding this model of witness within a Muslim setting. Section two of the book, "Bridging Two Worlds," examines more particularly how Christians might approach Islam based on the life and example of Mallouhi, with Chandler's caveat that he is not trying to outline a systematic methodology, but rather to reflect the values exhibited in Mallouhi's life. In section three, "New Directions for the Journey," Chandler presents some new

approaches and fresh thinking based on Mallouhi's life and experience.

The biographical sketch in the first section of the book was a particular pleasure for me to read. I have had the privilege of being a colleague and friend of Mazhar's for several years, and while I have been familiar with bits and pieces of his life journey, it was enlightening to get a more complete picture. One point I found striking was the antagonistic attitude of the community in which he grew up towards Christianity and the West. Mazhar (like most Arab Muslims) saw Christianity as the religious arm of the West, joined with political and military institutions in an effort to dominate and exploit the Muslim world. There are reasons for Muslims to feel this way... but unfortunately the anti-colonial attitudes Mazhar grew up with spilled over into his attitude towards the message of Christ. Mazhar says, "Christianity was seen as the enemy. And you need your enemy to be ugly. You don't want to discover anything good in your enemy, or you will find yourself in the wrong" (p. 20). This comment really hits home in light of American attitudes towards Islam subsequent to September 2001.

It was ultimately through his exposure to the Bible that Mazhar became captivated by Christ. He read the New Testament 27 times and the Old Testament 13 times over the course of a year. He says that "from the beginning, I came to the conclusion that Christ never intended to establish a new religion, but instead came to simply establish his life in and among us" (p. 23). Nevertheless, Mazhar was given only one model of

discipleship to emulate, namely the extraction model, which burdened the would-be disciple of Christ with the requirement of assimilation to Western-dominated Christendom. Mallouhi in his zeal for the Savior wanted to demonstrate his loyalty in the only way he knew, by assimilating to Westernized “Christian” society, but the harder he strived the more he was cut off from his own people and heritage. And in spite of his zeal, he was never really accepted by Arab Christians or even many Western Christians. Mazhar recently commented to me with sadness that many Muslims begin their journey just as he did, feeling that they need to curse and attack Islam in order to be accepted by Christians. He observes that Arabic-language Christian satellite TV channels are dominated by images of “converts” speaking against Islam. Mazhar notes that this simply contributes to the prevailing atmosphere of animosity in the world, with Muslims returning insults in the same way they have been challenged and insulted.

Indeed, Mallouhi doggedly pursued the “conflict of religions” paradigm until he saw its ultimate incompatibility with the message of Christ. Mazhar often speaks critically of the corrupt system of missions that reinforces such conflict. He recounted to me on one occasion how a well-known Christian apologist he met was so focused on attacking and criticizing Islam that in his old age his hatred and fear of Islam became an obsession. He would often suspect visitors of being Muslims who wanted to attack and kill him. His obsession reached the point of insanity, and he had to be

transferred to a mental hospital until the end of his life.

As for Mazhar, it was only after many years of struggling with the traditional conflict model that he began to see another path, one that respected people for their own inherent worth and showed them the value of Christ through loving service. Mazhar now recognizes that in order for the message of Jesus to truly transform and redeem Arab Muslim society from



within, decades and even centuries of respectful communication and service are needed. I find it striking that Mazhar is stating this intuitively and independently of similar views held by incarnational missiologists.

While Mazhar is well-known for his hospitality and for cultivating friends of all races, nationalities and religions, his life’s work has been focused on developing appropriate literature in Arabic for those with little exposure to the Biblical message. Very early in his journey with Christ, Mazhar began writing novels to communicate spiritual themes. But after years of frustration with literature that was “either offensive or irrelevant” (p. 57) Mazhar and his wife Christine resolved to begin publishing literature that would “shatter stereotypes, overcome prejudices, and illuminate, resolve

and explain typical Islamic understandings... by presenting Christ and his teachings in a culturally acceptable way” (ibid). In addition to writing novels, Mazhar has translated some works from English into Arabic using a style suitable for Muslim audiences.

After many years of writing and publishing, Mazhar began to focus more directly on the text of Scripture. In 1998 he published a commentary on the Gospel of Luke especially for Muslim audiences. It was bound in a beautiful binding with elegant eastern calligraphy and decorations, and it opened with endorsements by leading Muslim scholars. After the hugely positive reception of this work, Mazhar and an editorial team of Christian and Muslim coworkers continued with a commentary on Genesis (published 2001) and one on John making use of Sufi (that is, mystical) themes (2004). Currently he is working with this team on a translation of the New Testament in literary Arabic for Muslim readers.

Mazhar did not arrive at his current position easily, and he had many struggles with himself and with others, being hurt and even hurting others. It wasn’t easy to reach a place of true spiritual maturity. But now he feels peace in his identity as a follower of Christ who is culturally Muslim. His experience of being imprisoned in Syria in 1995 played a significant role in this transition. As Chandler puts it, Mazhar “began to see that God desired to transform this prison experience into a spiritual gift and blessing.” Mazhar’s perspective of how his imprisonment was used by God reminds me of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s own spiritual transformation in prison, a blessing so great

that he was able to say, “thank you prison for being in my life.”

As Chandler himself foresaw, I found the first section of the book, the biographical section, the most engaging one. As for sections two and three, while they focus more on “issues” or “methodology,” they are still biographical in nature and very memorable. One way to summarize the spirit and substance of these sections is in the words of Brian McLaren.

In his recent book *Everything Must Change*, McLaren says that one of the biggest failings of the Western church and the West in general has been that of “excessive self-confidence.”

This, in my experience, is the pivotal complaint non-Westerners have with Westerners who desire to proclaim their faith in Christ, and many of the illustrations and issues brought out in these sections of the book are an unpacking of this insight. For example, Gandhi and St. Francis of Assisi are presented as models for incarnational witness, exemplifying the exact opposite of “excessive self-confidence.” An incarnational witness takes a vulnerable “guest posture” and identifies culturally with those he or she is communicating with. The humility of such a proclamation honors and dignifies the listener, and allows him or her freedom to respond to the message without pressure and manipulation. The themes of suffering and sacrifice are also explored in these sections, as ways in which the follower of Christ can emulate his Lord.

One of the most Christ-like aspects of Mazhar described in this section is his people-orientation. Simply put, Mazhar loves people and loves being in communication with them, sharing their joys and sorrows. I recently saw

a good example of Mazhar’s concern for people when he flew hundreds of miles to comfort his long-standing American friend Greg. Over the years, Greg has encouraged and believed in Mazhar and his work, even when others dismissed or rejected him. Now that Greg’s wife suffers from a serious illness, Mazhar wanted to be with him at this difficult time. One acquaintance asked Mazhar why he was taking this long trip for just a few days, and when he heard the reason asked, “What will you get out of it?” But love is its own satisfaction, and in his genuine concern for people, Mazhar embodies the costly love of God in a broken, selfish and sinful world.

Hospitality is another Biblical value that Mazhar excels at, often embarrassing us Westerners by his graciousness. My wife and I have seen that this godly virtue seems to be in decline in both East and West, even among those who follow Christ. My own feeling is that increasing levels of global prosperity have led people to neglect hospitality, but while we may feel that we are able to be self-sufficient without the give-and-take of hospitality and its sister virtue generosity, rising levels of mental illness and depression show our real need for human companionship.

The chapters on the Bible in a Middle Eastern context and on storytelling the biblical message are particularly enlightening, not because they are methodological treatises, but because they give us a fresh perspective and because they pose questions that we still need to investigate in dialogue with Muslim friends. There is also an appendix containing an interview with Mazhar which offers further insight into his life and work.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and have given many copies to friends and acquaintances. Unfortunately it suffers from some repetition, and it could have

been edited to be more compact without sacrificing content. At least one friend complained to me about the style of the book, saying that he felt he had to work hard at plowing through its pages. On my part, I felt the style was very readable and engaging, but occasionally there were problems and inconsistencies in transcribing Arabic names and terminology. Furthermore, while readers might note hints in this book of Mazhar’s complex character, portraying this more clearly might have made Mazhar seem more approachable and human, thereby offering deeper inspiration for other pilgrims on the road of Christ.

A few readers have felt that this book advocates a universalist approach to salvation and evangelism, but anyone who knows Mazhar knows that he believes passionately that Jesus Christ is the only way to fully know God in this life and in the next. It seems that the discomfort some have with Chandler’s book has more to do with the baggage of the conflict model that they bring to the text than with the content of the book itself.

For readers who desire to get past statistics, arguments and methodology, *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road* offers a vivid and living picture of a truly Arab Muslim disciple of Christ. May many more Middle Easterners follow in Mazhar’s steps and move further down the path of pilgrimage towards the fullness of Christ! **IJFM**