

Making the Story Meaningful

Resurrecting the Middle Eastern Christ

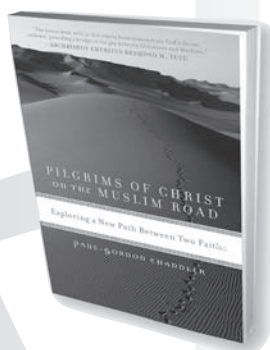
by Paul-Gordon Chandler

We have reduced ourselves to religions, to denominations, to confessions... instead of following my Palestinian compatriot from Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth.

—Elias Chacour (the Palestinian Archbishop of Galilee)

Once every hundred years Jesus of Nazareth meets Jesus of the Christian in a garden among the hills of Lebanon. And they talk long; each time Jesus of Nazareth goes away saying to Jesus of the Christian, "My friend, I fear we shall never, never agree."

—Kahlil Gibran (taken from *Sand and Foam*)



Editor's Note: This article is an excerpt from Chapter 6 of Paul-Gordon Chandler's new book *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: Exploring a New Path between Two Faiths* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007). Used by permission.

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Many Muslims perceive Christ as a Westerner with no relationship to Eastern culture. As Christine Mallouhi has written, "if Christ were walking the streets of his birthplace on the West Bank of Palestine today, I believe he would be mind-boggled by this perception of him. Who is this Christ and what sort of Christianity is this that no longer has anything to say to Eastern Muslims?"¹

Of the three great monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), Christianity is the only one to have had its center of influence move from the Middle East to the West to Rome, Canterbury, and beyond. Commenting on the impact of this move westward, Marhar writes in his publication *An Eastern Reading of the Gospel of Luke*,

A gap was created in the Arabs' understanding of Jesus Christ's message and its significance because of the absenteeism felt by them after Europe became Christian. Since Europe converted to Christianity, the gap between Arab Muslims on one side and Arab Christians on the other grew bigger and triggered a violent and negative reaction against Christianity. As a result, the Arabs overlooked the fact that Christ is an effect of our oriental heritage and that his message and teachings derive from our own culture and values.

Christianity is indeed a Middle Eastern faith in origin, not a Western faith. Born in Jerusalem, it received its intellectual frame in Antioch, Damascus, Alexandria, and Constantinople. At the Council of Nicea in AD 325, where the creed was hashed out, there were more bishops and leaders from Persia and India than from Western Europe. Due to various historical events, Christianity's center of gravity shifted slowly to the West.

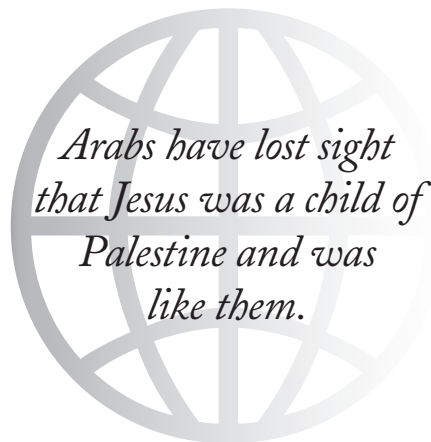
Christ was a Middle Easterner. He was culturally much more like today's Arab than like a Western Christian. In this regard, Mazhar serves to effectively bridge this gap. Perhaps his most significant spiritual contribution to this often hostile relationship has been of effectively stripping Christ of his Western trappings and introducing him to Muslims as one who was born in the Middle East, and who lived and died there. This is the Christ that Mazhar met as a young man on the Golan Heights, and this is a Christ that Muslims can understand. In his extrication of Christ from a Western culture and agenda, Mazhar is able to introduce a Christ who is both relevant and attractive to Arabs. By changing the traditional Muslim perceptions of who Jesus is, and introducing him as a Middle Easterner, Mazhar helped thousands of Muslims now see Christ in a new way. Muslims, like Tunisian writer Jalel El Mokh, describe Mazhar as "easternizing" Christ.

Mazhar is understandably proud of his Arab heritage, and his passion is to make sure Jesus comes across as a Middle Easterner. Desiring that Muslims see that Jesus Christ is from their own culture and background, he has built on the common Middle Eastern cultural heritage the Christian faith shares with Islam. Reflecting on this challenge, Mazhar says, "Arabs have lost sight that Jesus was a child of Palestine and was like them." He fully agrees with the words of his friend, the Palestinian Melchite Archbishop of Galilee, Elias Chacour: "They need to see Christ as their compatriot from Galilee—not as a foreign import."

By resurrecting the Middle Eastern Christ, Mazhar is acclimatizing the Arab community so that Christ can be naturalized within it. His approach once again echoes the words of E. Stanley Jones, "the Christ I presented would be the disentangled Christ—disentangled from being bound up with Western culture and Western forms of Christianity. He would stand in his own right, speaking directly to

the needs of persons as persons without any canceling disentanglements."

Mazhar presents Jesus as the Middle Easterner that he was, in order that his fellow Arab Muslim brothers and sisters may experience the lasting reconciliation found in the Middle Eastern Prince of Peace that Christ is today. While this theme pervades all of his efforts, such as in his various Middle Eastern presentations of the Christian Scriptures, his daily priority is his attempt to embody a demonstration of the Middle Eastern Christ in the living out of his own life among Muslims. He



has much to teach Western Christians about displaying Christ-likeness in the Arab world today.

Loving Your Neighbor as Yourself

Having undergone banishment from his family, imprisonment, national eviction, and solitary confinement, the sacrifice of suffering has not only spiritually deepened Mazhar, it has also developed in him a profound sensitivity to the needs of others. He is known throughout North Africa and the Middle East as a big-hearted man. Taking very seriously Jesus's second greatest commandment of "loving your neighbor as yourself," his relationships with people are fueled by an incredibly deep compassion and love for men and women in all stations of life—genuinely accepting them just as they are. Gentleness, kindness, open-heartedness, and joyfulness exude from him, and people are drawn to

him like a magnet. Children love him. Strangers almost instantly bond with him because of the warmth and the depth of being he displays. He has the ability to make every person he comes across feel like they are the center of the universe.

Mazhar's refreshing, spontaneous relational manner enables him to connect with people everywhere he goes showing an authentic compassion to even the stranger he meets on the street. He asks people about their deepest needs and problems, and is carefully attuned to crisis moments...

Mazhar has a renowned capacity for people and friendships, both Muslim and Christian, and works hard at staying in touch with them, regardless of where they live. He knows by heart the phone numbers of hundreds of friends around the world...

Everywhere Mazhar has lived, in the Middle East and in the West, he has formed a weekly meeting of men, drawn largely from the local intellectual and artistic communities. Many deep relationships have come about as a result of these get-togethers, as Mazhar loves to sit with the men and talk for hours...

Much of Mazhar's success in the Middle East relates to key Muslim leaders who have helped him because of friendship, not necessarily because they endorsed his ideas and faith in Christ. An Australian couple who visited the Mallouhis in Beirut recalls the respect people had for Mazhar everywhere they seemed to go...

Mazhar naturally brings people together. I recall a bookshop owner in downtown Beirut telling me that Mazhar is the "glue" that holds together their literary and bookselling community in that part of the city. Mazhar is deeply passionate about family values and brotherly love. Often, just after meeting someone, Mazhar will delve into deeply personal details of their life and belief system. Focusing on an issue they have been struggling with and are yet unable to

resolve, Mazhar and his direct style are therefore refreshing to Muslims, as he knows from personal experience the issues with which they struggle. While Mazhar's approach would be considered abrupt in the West, his "cut to the chase" attitude is one that shows a genuine and sincere interest, even compassion, to the Arab stranger he encounters on the street.

Most important of all, Mazhar loves people regardless of their faith orientation. Being "people centered," he does not see "Muslims" or "Christians," but rather simply people made in God's image and journeying toward God to greater or lesser degrees. Once in North Africa, Mazhar recalls his friend Muhammad asking him, "Will you still be my friend when I reject your message [Mazhar's love of Christ]?" "Of course" was Mazhar's reply; but it did show a perception that many Muslims have of Christians that they are only "friends" for the agenda of conversion. Sometime later, Muhammad deeply hurt Mazhar. They were eventually able to sort things out and Muhammad experienced forgiveness from him. Sometime later, Muhammad actually defended Christian faith as being different due to its importance of love for others. He now describes himself as someone who is attempting to follow the way of Christ... Today Mazhar, living in Beirut, endears himself to the range of religious traditions across Lebanon from participating in Sufi groups, to meeting with Shia leaders, to partying with Catholic and Orthodox friends.

Many of Mazhar's relationships come about thanks to his tremendous sense of humor. His laughter is infectious and he loves to joke with others: it's his way of celebrating his love of God-given life. When driving and stopped at a traffic light, Mazhar more often than not will start conversations and humorous interchanges with either those in cars next to him or the traffic police. Once, when he managed a coffee shop in Morocco, he noticed the plainclothes policeman assigned to watch him was walking

A perception that many Muslims have of Christians [is] that they are only "friends" for the agenda of conversion.

past, and he called out to him, saying, "Where do you think you're going? You are supposed to be here, keeping an eye on me."

Mazhar exhibits a love for people with no ulterior agenda. He humorously tells the story of his first visit to the U.S. and of being invited to a Christian couple's home for dinner. While eating, he quickly realized that they were actually using the dinner to sell him Amway products. This shook him as it is totally contrary to the understanding and practice of hospitality in an Arab culture. It is sobering to have him observe that Christians often establish relationships with a hidden purpose behind them, as opposed to genuinely loving people just for who they are.

In this connection, the example of Charles de Foucauld is once again pertinent. Living among the Muslim Tuareg peoples in the southern Algerian desert, Foucauld sought to simply love them and demonstrate the life of Christ among them. Commenting on the effectiveness of Foucauld's approach, Muslim writer Al Merad wrote, "When this European man or woman, when these Christians, gave up their advantages and chose to come and share the... lot of the Muslim population in the mountains or the desert, such a choice must have appeared to be the outcome of a conversion bearing the unmistakable mark of the divine. Hence the signs of respect, trust and affection with which the Tuareg surrounded their venerable neighbor [Foucauld], the 'Christian marabout' ['holy man']."²

Exhibiting The Middle Eastern Hospitality of Christ

Mazhar's commitment to Jesus's commandment and life illustration of "loving your neighbor as yourself" naturally translates into practicing a

hospitality that makes even the reputation of Middle Eastern hospitality look meager. The famed Middle Eastern custom of elaborate and generous hospitality is known the world over. This is particularly true of the Bedouin, whose hospitality is deservedly famous, as anyone who has experienced it can witness. Nothing the Bedouin do for the guest is too good and nothing too bothersome or difficult. The Bedouin host does all in his ability to convey the honoring impression that entertaining his guest is the greatest happiness he has ever known.

"The guest is a guest of God" is a well-known Arab Muslim proverb that reflects the theological depth of their view of hospitality. Experienced Islamists and Arabists, such as the late twentieth-century Christian French scholar Louis Massignon, repeatedly address the spiritual importance of hospitality to Muslims. Their model is of the Old Testament patriarch, Abraham, and his experience; in welcoming the stranger, we are welcoming God among us. Another popular Arab proverb says, "God comes to us in the person of a guest." Massignon, in his lifetime study of Islam, termed this *l'hospitalité sacrée*—"sacred hospitality." Hospitality pre-figured for him the stance of God himself toward human beings—the sacredness of the guest. Paradoxically, this Islamic code of hospitality enabled Christian missions to penetrate parts of the Muslim world considered today by some as the least receptive to Christian work (such as the Gulf countries of Oman, the UAE, and Kuwait), and establish the few historic Christian posts that still exist there today.

Hospitality is so fundamental to Islamic culture that even when Mazhar was jailed overnight in Cairo prior to being deported, the Muslim fundamentalists in his cell served as his

hosts, sharing with him a blanket and food. Likewise, during the Gulf War of the early 1990s, while Christine was alone with their sons in Cairo following Mazhar's deportation, their Muslim friends did the shopping for her and would refuse to be reimbursed, releasing her from having to stand for hours in crowded lines. They would respond to her expressions of thanks by saying, "It's my pleasure to do this for my brother Mazhar."

Small wonder then that Egyptian Christian theologian, Dr. Ekram Lamie, would say, "Mazhar is the truest Arab I know; full of generosity, he is a master of hospitality." Likewise, a Tunisian Muslim leader describes Mazhar as "this short man with a huge smile, large hands of hospitality, and a heart of love, [who] has befriended and blessed countless people." Because of this openness, a steady stream of hundreds of people a week flowed through the Mallouhis' house in Cairo. Some come to party, some to pray. They include Muslim fundamentalist sheiks, Catholic priests and nuns, Baptist pastors, Coptic Orthodox, Communists, Jewish rabbis, Baha'is, and all kinds of Western expatriates. The Mallouhis opened their home to every person God brings along, including at times people they found in the street, whom they helped and fed. One family was a mother and her newly delivered child. The couple had miscalculated the delivery date and used all their money for the hospital bill. Christine recalls how once four Scandinavian men arrived at their house with backpacks. They were given their address in a campground in Spain and told this was a great place to stay in Morocco. Once Mazhar saw a young Australian lady at the airport in Cairo who had just arrived, flustered and clearly not comfortable by herself in this strange Arab city. Offering to help, he learned that she had booked a hotel, but being that it was late at night, he brought her home and she actually stayed for Christmas with the Mallouhi family. Even early on as a young single student

at Fuller Seminary in the U.S., Mazhar would host dinners, cooking Middle Eastern food for thirty to forty people. People who have visited the Mallouhis, whether in Beirut, Tunis, Rabat, Fez, or Cairo, say that it seemed like they devoted all their time to them, lavishing attention on their guests.

Ironically, however, when Muslims read about Jesus in the Gospels, one of the first things they recognize is his exceptional practice of hospitality, his characteristic trait of welcoming all who came his way. Once in a desert oasis in the Gulf region, Mazhar thanked a man



for his hospitality to them, to which the Muslim man replied, "Don't forget that as an Easterner, Christ was very hospitable. He took his obligation as a host seriously and fed the five thousand."

Embodying the Spirituality of Christ—Living In the Presence of God

In reading the Gospels, Mazhar sees Christ as someone who naturally lived in and embodied the presence of God as he journeyed throughout Palestine. Interestingly, this is quite similar to a Muslim's understanding of prayer, for to a Muslim, prayer to God can take place anywhere—in the street, on the sidewalk, in a field, at a football match, and so on. The gathering for communal worship, something that is quite strongly emphasized in Christianity, is often immaterial to Muslim spirituality.

Mazhar's perception is that Christians often focus too much on what they do

inside a building, as opposed to the natural living out of their lives in all contexts of life. In this sense, Mazhar embodies a unique display of spirituality in his following of Christ: one that is very akin to Brother Lawrence's "practicing the presence of God at all times." Mazhar takes a "God view" of life, and brings God into all of life quite spontaneously. He sees his faith in Christ as a way of living out his life, and desires to display to all the beauty of Christ. It is fascinating to watch him talking about the sweetness of Christ to those gathered around him in Arab cafés, as he puffs on a water pipe and fingers his prayer beads.

An avid walker, Mazhar prays while walking, and describes prayer as living in a continual listening disposition toward God. In this sense, he sees prayer as essentially attempting to participate in God's will—which more often than not he believes will involve him directly in the answering of the prayer request.

Sensory in orientation, Mazhar has become more of a mystic over the years. Hence in Islam he identifies and resonates most with Sufism and ties that into his own experience of hearing and listening to the voice of Jesus. Several times Mazhar has had mystical experiences or visions where he visually saw and physically felt the presence of Jesus near him. Today his spiritual interaction is largely with those focused on seeking harmony and who are interested in getting closer to Nabi Isa (Teacher Jesus), and experiencing him as someone whom they desire to have become more a part of their lives. In his embracing of greater and greater mystery throughout his own spiritual pilgrimage, he needs fewer answers to the more complex questions of life.

At the same time Mazhar is very proactive and completely natural with others in sharing about his own faith in Christ. He often takes the Gospels (Injil) with him to read in the café, just as Muslims read the Qur'an everywhere. People often ask him, "What

are you reading?” Not infrequently, when he notices Muslims next to him reading over his shoulder out of curiosity, he lets them finish the page before turning it. Experientially oriented, he primarily shares with others from his own spiritual journey—believing that others will see Christ through us if we have truly experienced him. Mazhar loves to highlight, “The first disciples of Christ had a beautiful expression: ‘Come and see.’” He truly relishes his walk with God, and as a result his love for God is infectious. He believes “when you see someone in love, it shows.” According to Mazhar’s observation, many Western Christians feel hesitant and unnatural in sharing their own spiritual journeys with others, let alone with Muslims, and therefore act artificially. He enjoys telling the humorous story of a young woman sharing about Christ who was so nervous talking with an elderly Muslim lady that she said, “My name is Jesus, and I want to tell you about Jessica.” Paradoxically, there is no need at all in a Muslim context to feel uncomfortable sharing about one’s spiritual journey, as “religious” speech is appreciated and respected, in contrast to the West where people are uptight when talking about religion.

Mazhar’s natural way of sharing about Christ is illustrated in an experience with two well-known writers in Tunisia. One day, the Tunisian writer Hassan Ben Othman (who has criticized and written strongly against Muslim fundamentalists to the extent that he is called an “infidel” by some) and Mazhar were walking along with Hassan Ben Nasser (another respected Tunisian writer). Ben Othman said to him, “When I read one of your books, it made me think that you might be a ‘missionary.’” Mazhar’s natural and authentic response was, “Thank you for honoring me today. You have reminded me of my responsibility in life of sharing about our beautiful Lord.” This open and natural approach is greatly respected by other Muslims. Once when Mazhar visited the office of his

Whenever he visits a new place it is [Mazhar’s] practice to make contact early on with the local Islamic leadership in that community.

friend and Muslim writer Ahmed Swayden’s wife, who serves as a director in the Ministry of Economics in Damascus, she called out to her friends on the floor and said, “Here is our missionary friend working in North Africa.” As a Muslim, she was honored to have this type of “missionary friend.”

Collaborating with Arab and Islamic Culture

Just as Jesus fully employed the Palestinian Jewish culture of his day to enhance his communication of the Kingdom of God, Mazhar also proactively seeks to use and benefit from today’s Arab (Middle Eastern) and Islamic culture in sharing about Christ with his fellow Muslims. His eager collaboration with important aspects and values of his local culture actually facilitates an authentic natural display of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Mazhar is often asked by foreigners, and sometimes Arab Christians, how he is able to be so publicly open about his faith in Christ within a Muslim context. In this regard, he benefits from Islam’s “*command to witness to their faith*.” When Mazhar is asked by Muslims if he is a “missionary” (due to his passion of sharing about “his Master” with them), he asks them in response, “Are you a missionary?” When a Muslim asks him what he means by that question, Mazhar says, “Well, you have a *shahada* don’t you? [The *shahada* is the statement of belief that all Muslims recite out loud daily: “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet.”] Well, when you confess the *shahada* and tell others about it, does that make you a missionary? I too have a *shahada*, and I must talk about it with others. Does that make me a missionary?”

Another aspect of Arab culture that has opened many doors for Mazhar’s work is the prominent *Arab emphasis on*

status and position. Instead of chafing under it, he chooses to use it to gain an open and respected platform to introduce the Christ of the Middle East. As a result of the literary credibility he has obtained, for many years Mazhar has proactively built close friendships with respected leaders of Arab society, from prominent Muslim imams to key political and commercial leaders. Whenever he visits a new place it is his practice to make contact early on with the local Islamic leadership in that community. If a prominent sheik talks with and befriends Mazhar, this enables others in that local Arab community to feel much more secure and free to openly discuss with him issues of faith.

One of the strongest cultural mores in Arab society is to avoid, at whatever the cost, any possibility of being shamed, whether personally or publicly. At times this desire to avoid shame provides a natural door for Mazhar to encourage Islamic leaders to genuinely explore the teachings of Christ. Once when he led a group of Westerners through Al Azhar Mosque in Cairo, he asked one of the local sheiks to share with the visitors about the Islamic faith. As Mazhar translated the sheik’s words from Arabic to English for the guests, it became clear, due to his inaccurate information about the New Testament, that the sheik had never read it. Mazhar stopped translating and said to the sheik in Arabic (which the visitors could not understand), “How can I explain to them that you, a religious leader in this prestigious mosque, have not studied, let alone opened, the New Testament (Injil). This is embarrassing to me as an Arab.” The sheik then begged Mazhar not to let the guests know about his failure to do so, as not to be shamed in front of them, and then promised to read and study the New Testament if one were given to him, in

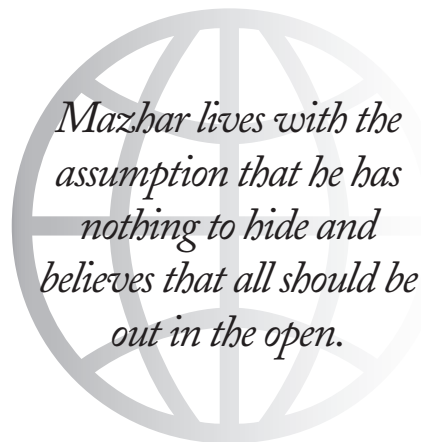
order to know firsthand what it says before he ever lectures on it again.

Preserving *honor* in this way is one of the most prominent values within Arab culture. Mazhar therefore believes that one of the fundamental principles for Christians to follow is to respect and honor Muslims at all times. This is why he strongly believes that if Westerners desire to learn about Islam, they should do so from Muslims themselves, and not from Westerners, even those who have obtained a post-graduate degree in Islamics. Mazhar has taken many Christians to sheiks to learn about Islam. Conversely, he also works to gain the right for Muslims to learn firsthand about Christ from Christians. In visiting with sheiks, he often speaks to them about breaking down the walls that divide the two faiths by posing the question, “If I want to study about Islam, is it fair for me to study what a Buddhist believes about it? Or should I come to you and ask a Muslim sheik? We need to obtain our information firsthand and not accept others’ interpretations of our faith.”

Mazhar believes that *honesty and integrity* need to be the pillars upon which Christians build their relationships with Muslims. This mandates that Christians have no hidden agenda, for as the Arab proverb states, “You can’t carry two watermelons in one hand.” Mazhar himself lives with the assumption that he has nothing to hide and believes that all should be out in the open. Once when a government informant visited Mazhar’s house (at his invitation), he purposely left the man alone in the room to give him a chance to investigate. It was his way of letting the man know that he had nothing to hide.

This emphasis of Mazhar’s on the need for honesty and the need to demonstrate complete integrity is illustrated in the special counsel he gave to an American desiring to obtain a visa for Syria, Mazhar’s native country. Syria refused to grant visas to anyone

who had been to Israel and this individual had been there ten years ago. Many Westerners who had been to Israel found ways to fudge on the visa application, but this individual’s conscience did not allow him to do so. He then spoke to Mazhar about the situation, and Mazhar advised him to go to the Syrian consulate and ask to speak to the consul in person and then to tell him that he really wanted to visit his country, but there was a question on the visa application that troubled him: “Have you ever been to occupied Palestine?” Then Mazhar suggested



he ask the consul, “Is this a political question about my attitude toward the Palestinian issue or do you just want to know if I have ever been in the geographical territory of Palestine? I am not a Zionist, but I don’t want to mislead you about my visit there some years ago.” He went and did this just as Mazhar had recommended and the Syrian consul instructed him to come back after lunch. Upon his return, the consul shared with him that he should reject his application, but that because he had told the truth, he was going to grant him the visa. Mazhar’s American acquaintance then went to the clerk, who requested him to submit the application, but not to answer the question about visiting occupied Palestine. He did as instructed, signed the application and submitted it, noticing that the clerk then put a check in the box that he had not visited occupied Palestine. He was then promptly given a visa.

Interestingly, the person immediately ahead of him in line was refused a visa because the Syrian consul was convinced he had gone to Israel.

Presenting the Incomparable Beauty of the Eastern Christ

The primary focus of Mazhar’s life and writing is to display a positive and culturally relevant Jesus to Arab Muslims, as opposed to presenting Christianity. He is not at all interested in comparing “this religious system versus that system.” He is passionate about “his Master” and his faith in Christ is contagious. Hearing Mazhar say with deep affection, “How I love my Lord,” as he often does, ignites a desire to deepen one’s own journey with Christ.

Focused on Jesus, and not on religion, Mazhar says, “Christ came to bring the Kingdom of God in the human heart—not to establish another religion. His message is very simple actually. However, as they say, when the Christian faith moved to the Greeks, they made it into a philosophy. When it went to the Romans, they made it into an institution. And when it went all the way West, it was turned into an enterprise, a business.”

Mazhar shares his belief that Christians have often presented a Christ completely covered over by their Christianity. However, Christianity and Jesus are not the same, he emphasizes. Mazhar shares the following analogy about religion getting in the way of seeing and experiencing Christ: “Religion can often end up being like the man who sells bottles of water near a fresh running stream—the people who buy the bottled water have no idea about the close proximity of the stream. And even the person selling the bottled water often does everything possible to keep people from seeing the nearby stream, because then his own business is finished.”

Virginia Cobb's comments on what followers of Christ have to share with their Muslim friends are profound.

Our message is a *person we've experienced*, not a doctrine, system, religion, book, church, ethic. Christ is extremely attractive to Muslims. They have the highest respect for him and yearn to know more about him. We can present the person Jesus and his teachings as our supreme and only emphasis, the only thing we have to add to the foundation of reverence for God and moral emphasis already found in Islam. Our faith in him is that once we lead a person to him, he will be in direct contact with that person, transform and guide in all else. . . . We must emphasize Christ as a living person, and leave all else in a secondary position.³

Christians are often inaccurately called a "People of the Book." Instead, we should be "People of the Person," Mazhar suggests. The Christian faith has nothing to do with knowing a creed, or living a set of moral laws; or believing certain doctrines, but rather everything to do with knowing a person. A problem many Christians have often had is that they try to present Christianity as a better religion than any other, yet it isn't necessarily so. (Let's remember that Jesus himself wasn't a Christian.) As Mazhar demonstrates, people are not typically interested in Christianity for all kinds of abstract reasons; they are fascinated with Jesus as he really was and is. The Jesus who is presented in the Gospels is what naturally attracts people. Yet it is often difficult to see *that* Jesus for all the religious and cultural baggage surrounding him.

This echoes what the late Anglican Bishop Stephen Neil wrote when addressing Christian witness among Muslims,

The [follower of Christ] has no other message for the Muslim than Jesus Christ himself. He asks no more of the Muslim than that he will look at Jesus Christ, as he is presented in the Gospels, patiently, sincerely and without prejudice The Muslim

Christians are often incorrectly called a "People of the Book." Instead we should be "People of the Person," Mazhar suggests.

thinks that he already knows about Jesus all that it is possible to know; why should he suppose that he still have anything to learn? . . . But, if he can be persuaded to look at Jesus, strange things may happen.⁴

Hence, Mazhar is always talking about Jesus and sharing with both Muslims and Christians about the beauty, fullness of life, and joy that he has found in Christ. His passion is to see all people, regardless of faith tradition, walk in the footsteps of Christ, living the way he lived, and following his teachings. "When Christ said, 'I am the way' . . . he was saying, 'my way is the way to live your life; a way that leads to God,'" reflects Mazhar. When asked about his primary motivation for sharing with others about Christ, he responds with this story: "Let's say I have a friend who has a son who has been separated from him for many years. And every time I am with my friend (the father) he talks about how much he loves his son, misses him, and longs to be with him. Then one day as I am walking through the city I see his son. Now let me ask you, What kind of friend am I to the father if I don't go to the son and tell him how much I know his father longs for him?" In regard to his Muslim brothers and sisters, he always starts where they are, not where Christ is, and gently leads them toward Christ. Often it is references to Isa al Masih (Jesus) in the Qur'an that compel Muslims to seek out more information about Jesus. As very few suitable publications about Christ's life for Muslims in Arabic existed in the secular market (even though Christ is such an important figure in the Qur'an), Mazhar, through his publishing association, Al Kalima, published a very readable biography on the life of Christ titled *The Master: A Life of Jesus*.

An illustration of Mazhar's approach to sharing about Christ with his fellow Muslims comes from Vincent Donovan, a Catholic priest who worked among the Masai peoples in Kenya. Addressing the Masai, he writes in his excellent book, *Christianity Rediscovered*,⁵

Everyone knows how devout you Masai are, the faith you have, your beautiful worship of God. You have known God and he has loved you.

Similarly, Mazhar believes God has created this world and is already present and working within his creation. The role of followers of Christ is not to take God with us, but to discover "the God who is already present" and proclaim him as the God who is the Father of the Lord Jesus. God has always gone ahead of us, and is both already there and being experienced. No one should attempt to bring in an opposing God, who is bigger and better, but instead share how the existing God is bigger and better than is recognized, and can be experienced more fully through Jesus Christ.

In this sense, we Westerners who seek to follow Christ are called to make every effort to be sure we are following and presenting the Christ of the Gospels. The challenge for those who call themselves followers of Christ is to not let our existing preconceptions (or those which we have perhaps been taught—albeit if in the church) get in the way of seeing who Jesus really is. In C. S. Lewis's book, *The Magician's Nephew* (in the Chronicles of Narnia), one of the characters says, "For what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing." Often religion (such as institutional Christianity) can get in the way, like a folding screen, in front of Jesus, where Christianity covers up the living Christ. Yet, as Mazhar's life and message highlights, if anything

is true about the Christian faith, it is true because of Christ, not because of Christianity, which has grown up around him over the centuries. The challenge is to work toward making sure we are following the Christ of the Gospels. And really the only way to know who the real Jesus is, whether one be a Christian or Muslim, is to be immersed directly in the Gospels—for the central message of the Gospels is not primarily the teaching of Jesus, but Jesus himself.

This requires going on a lifelong quest, spending our lives searching for Jesus—for a summary of the Christian life of faith is essentially about a continual encountering of God in deeper and closer ways through Christ. In this regard, we will never get to the point of knowing or understanding all there is to know or understand about Jesus. The spiritual life is “a meeting of Jesus for the first time”—over and over again. I love the way the late English writer Malcolm Muggeridge put it: “Jesus, for me, has been a long process of discovery—a process that is by no

means over, and never can be. Like an infinitely precious and rewarding human relationship which goes on developing and constantly reveals new depths and possibilities of intimacy.” At Jesus’s trial, surely Peter was deeply right when he insisted of Jesus, “I don’t know the man.” For even after all those years of following Jesus, he still really didn’t know who he was. And neither do we. For Christ will always be beyond our full grasp.

Kahlil Gibran, the famous Arab Lebanese writer of Christian background, spent the last years of his life writing what became his longest book, titled *Jesus, Son of Man*.

In regard to how Jesus breaks our stereotypes, Gibran writes,

No other man ever walked the way
He walked. Was it a breath born in
my garden that moved to the east?
Or was it a storm that would shake
all things to their foundations?

As C. S. Lewis, one of Mazhar’s favorite Western writers, asked,

“What are we to make of Jesus
Christ?” This is a question which has,

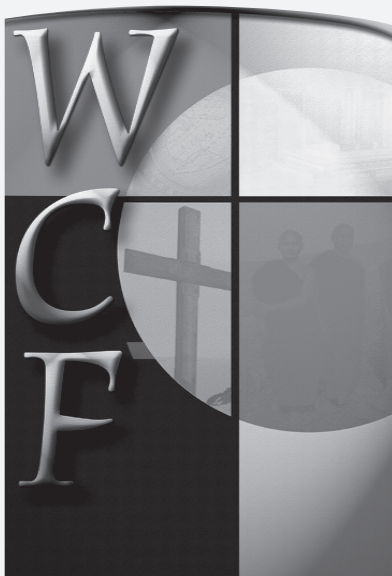
in a sense, a frantically comic side. For the real question is not what are we to make of Christ, but what is He to make of us?

In planting Jesus as a Middle Easterner in today’s Arab Islamic society, Mazhar makes the way of knowing Jesus something more natural and legitimate for Muslims. As Mahatma Gandhi enabled Indians to visualize Christ walking down their Indian roads, so Mazhar returns Christ to his cultural origins, walking naturally down the roads of the Middle East. **IJFM**

Endnotes

1. Christine Mallouhi, *Waging Peace on Islam* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press: 2000), 322.
2. Ali Merad, *Christian Hermit in an Islamic World: A Muslim’s View of Charles de Foucauld* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 25.
3. Virginia Cobb, “Methods for Work among Muslims” (paper given at the Teheran Conference, 1969).
4. Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 89.
5. Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991).

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