

Contextualizing the Gospel to the Worldview of Folk Muslims



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A recent article in the *Kansas City Star* emphasizes the sway folk Islam holds over many Muslims today.

For more than two years, Ali Hussain Sibat of Lebanon has been imprisoned in Saudi Arabia, convicted of sorcery and sentenced to death...His crimes: manipulating spirits, predicting the future, concocting potions and conjuring spells on a call-in TV show called "The Hidden" on a Lebanese channel, Scheherazade. It was, in effect, a Middle Eastern psychic hot line...Sibat was jailed after agreeing to give a woman a potion so that her husband would divorce his second wife. "Most of my treatments were with honey and seeds," He said. "You would put the charm in the honey and drink from it."²

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² "‘Sorcerer’ Awaits Beheading by Saudi Officials," *Kansas City Star* (April 25, 2010): A:26.

Muslims number slightly over 1.2 billion persons worldwide, making Islam the world's second largest religion.³ Folk Islam mixes "pristine Islam with the ancient religious traditions and practices of ordinary people."⁴ Estimates project that seventy percent⁵ of Muslims follow folk Islam.⁶ Hiebert, Shaw and Tienou state, "The failure to understand folk religions has been a major blind spot in missions."⁷

Historically the major approaches for reaching Muslims with the Gospel⁸ coalesce around three broad categories. The techniques of apologetics, polemics and dialogue comprise the first method. The second seeks some common ground by contextualizing Muslim culture and Islamic forms.⁹ The third approach combines portions of the first two techniques.

I contend that cognitive methods possess limited effectiveness with folk Muslims because rational arguments fail to answer the 'why' questions posed by folk religion. Most contextualization techniques also miss the mark because only a small number of Muslims practice official Islam.¹⁰ I argue for an approach contextualized to folk Islam's worldview.

³ P. Marshall, R Green, L. Gilbert, *Islam at the Crossroads* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2002), 73.

⁴ W. J. Saal, *Reaching Muslims for Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 51.

⁵ Ninety years ago S. M. Zwemer (*The Influence of Animism on Islam* [New York: Macmillan, 1920], viii) placed the practitioners of popular Islam at ninety-four percent.

⁶ P. Parshall, *Bridges to Islam: a Christian Perspective on Folk Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2006), 2.

⁷ P. G. Hiebert, R. D. Shaw, T. Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 29. These authors call folk religion "the religious beliefs of the common people" (p. 74). Stephen Neil says about forty percent of the world holds to this worldview (in D. J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* [2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991], 223).

⁸ For this article I use the description of the Christian Gospel found in First Corinthians 15:1–5.

⁹ D. J. Hesselgrave & E. Rommen, 2000. *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 113–14.

¹⁰ B. A. Musk, *Popular Islam: An Investigation into the Phenomenology and Ethnotheological Bases of Popular Islamic Belief and Practice* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation; Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1984), 338 (UNISA).

FOLK RELIGION AND ISLAM

Joshua Massey divides Muslims into nine categories: *Nominal Muslims, fringe Muslims, liberal left-wing Muslims, conservative right-wing Muslims*,¹¹ *ultra-orthodox Muslims*,¹² *modern Muslims, communistic Muslims, rice Muslims, and mystical Muslims*.¹³ Massey says this last category is composed of “*Sufis and folk Muslims*”¹⁴ who, according to *Wahhabis* and conservative right-wing Muslims, are desperately in need of serious reform.” Two principal streams feed into folk Islam. These include (1) Islamic influences from official Islam (especially *Sufism*) and (2) Traditional religious practices (including ATR—African Traditional Religion).

Islamic Influences on Folk Islam

The most basic beliefs of Muslims are set forth in what is known as the ‘Five Pillars of Islam.’ *Understanding Islam* (1989), a book published by the Saudi Arabian government, lists these pillars as the declaration of faith, prayer, *zakat*, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. In addition to the Qur’an, Muslims revere the *hadith*¹⁵ and the *sunna*.¹⁶

¹¹ Petterson calls this category ‘political Islam’ and states, “Neither political Islam nor Islamic fundamentalism should be equated with extremism, for although some Islamists are extremists, most of course are not.” (*Inside Sudan: Political Islam, Conflict, and Catastrophe* [Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999], 191).

¹² Esposito and Mogahed place the percentage of “politically radicalized” Muslims at about seven percent. This figure comes from a Gallup Poll survey conducted in the ten most populous Muslim countries, making up eighty percent of Islam (J. L. Esposito & D. Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* [New York: Gallup Press, 2007], 70, 193).

¹³ J. Massey, “His Ways are not Our Ways,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 35 (1999):198.

¹⁴ Massey places *Sufis* and folk Muslims under the category of “mystical Muslims.” I suggest that folk Muslims are the broader classification and *Sufis* (or mystical Muslims) a subset. While *Sufis* are folk Muslims, not all folk Muslims are “mystical.”

¹⁵ The *hadith* is a collection of stories and sayings about Muhammad (see G. W. Braswell Jr., *Islam: Its Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power* [Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996], 11).

¹⁶ *Understanding Islam and the Muslims* (Washington, DC: Islamic affairs department, the embassy of Saudi Arabia, 1989) 13, 16–17, 20. M. Ruthven says, “it [the *Sunna*] means the living ‘practical’ [quotation his] tradition, assumed to be based on the general practice and authority of the Prophet and his com-

Many writers see a strong link between official Islam and folk religion. Musk writes, “In Many respects, the formal religion couches within its own codifications and condoned practices, elements of folk Islam.”¹⁷ Zwemer comments, “Not only do we find bibliolatriy, i.e. worship of the Book, but also bibliomancy, i.e. the use of the Qur’an for magical or superstitious purposes.”¹⁸ He also noted that pagan superstitions “are imbedded in the Koran and were not altogether rejected by Mohammad himself, much less by his companions.”¹⁹ Lewis adds, “the Qur’an itself provides scriptural warrant for the existence of a host of subsidiary powers and spirits.”²⁰

Subdivisions in Official Islam.

Official Islam deemphasizes their divisions and portrays Muslims as a unified family.²¹ Despite this claim, Khalid Duran counts seventy-three different sects within Islam.²² Marshall, Green and Gilbert narrow the segments of Islam to three groups—*Sunni*’s, *Shi’ites*, and *Sufi*’s, stating, “for simplicity’s sake...Islam can be divided into three fundamental groups, the third generally being part of either of the first two.”²³

Sunni Islam

The *Sunnis* are identified with orthodoxy in Islam. Braswell places their number at ninety percent of all Muslims,²⁴ while others put the estimate at about eighty-five percent.²⁵ The Ninth Century Muslim theologian Shafi’i undertook a revision of Islamic law, developing what became known as *Sharia*.²⁶ Shafi’i’ established the Islamic hermeneutic

panions.” (*Islam in the World*. [New York: Oxford University Press, 2006], 134). See also, *Understanding Islam and the Muslims*, 12)

¹⁷ Musk, *Holy War*, 229.

¹⁸ Zwemer, *Influence of Animism*, 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ I. M. Lewis, *Islam in Tropical Africa* (2nd ed.; London: Hutchinson University Library for Africa, 1980), 60.

²¹ S. H. Nasr, 2003. *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 14–15.

²² In P. Marshall, R. Green, L. Gilbert, *Islam at the Crossroads* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 27.

²³ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁴ Braswell, *Islam: Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*, 90.

²⁵ Esposito & Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?* 2.

²⁶ Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 133. Watt says, “In addition to its doctrinal teaching the Qur’an contains liturgical and legal or social prescriptions for the

that stands today for determining orthodoxy in Islam, combining a high view of the Qur'an with an acceptable level of Mohammad veneration.

Although *Sunnis* represent officialdom in Islam, the fervent *Wahhabis*²⁷ sometimes stray into folk practices. Wheatcroft calls the ascetic and extremist practices of *Wahhabi Sunnis* folk Islam.²⁸ During the days of Shafi'i, *Sunni* rationalists (*ahl al-kalam*) argued for the deity of the Qur'an while *Sunni* traditionalists (*ahl al-hadith*²⁹) made a case for the supremacy of the Prophet's example.³⁰

Shi'a Islam

The minority *Shi'a* branch of Islam is disparaged by the *Sunnis* primarily because of their folk practices. After Muhammad died in 632 a succession of four *caliphs* was chosen from the *Quraysh* tribe in Arabia to lead the movement.³¹ Islam divided over the question of a successor to the fourth *caliph*, Ali.³²

Shi'ites believe Ali inherited the Prophet's infallibility in Qur'anic interpretation and leadership. These qualities coupled with his blood kinship³³ with Mohammad cause *Shi'ites* to regard Ali as the first *Imam*. *Shi'ites* reject the *Sunni caliphate*³⁴ and believe Islamic spiritual authority is invested in the *Imam*. The martyrdoms of Ali (661) and his

life of the community of Muslims. These rules were greatly elaborated by Muslim jurists in later times to constitute what is now known as 'Islamic law' or 'the *Shari'a*.'" Watt, (*Mohammad: Prophet and Statesman* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961], 162).

²⁷ The followers of Abd el Wahhab are ultra-conservative and puritanical and are the foremost *Sunni* subject. Wahhab lived between 1703-1787 (G. Ausenda, *Leisurely Nomads: the Hadendoa [Beja] of the Gash Delta and Their Transition to Sedentary Village Life* [Sudan] [Unpublished doctoral dissertation. New York: Columbia University, 1987], 447-48).

²⁸ A. Wheatcroft, *Infidels: A History of the Conflict Between Christendom and Islam* (New York: Random House, 2004), 358.

²⁹ People of the *Hadith* (story).

³⁰ Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 134-35.

³¹ Braswell, *Islam: Its Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*, 90.

³² P. Sookhdeo, *Global Jihad* (McLean, VA: Isaac Publishing, 2007), 216.

Ali was a son-in-law of the Prophet and the husband of his sole surviving child, Fatima (S. Numani, *'Umar* [London: I.B. Taurus, 2004], 20). Also, Ali was the father of Muhammad's only grandchildren, Hassan and Hussein.

³³ Ali was also the Prophet's cousin.

³⁴ Ali was both the fourth *caliph* of the *Sunnis* and the first *Imam* of the *Shi'ites* (Braswell, *Islam: Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*, 91).

sons Hassan (680) and Hussein (680) by *Kharijite*³⁵ and *Sunni* partisans established a permanent schism in Islam.³⁶

Shi'ites and *Sunnis* broke ranks over the question of succession to the Prophet.³⁷ Nasr says, "The *Shi'ites* believed that such a person [the Imam³⁸] should also be able to interpret the Qur'an and the Law and in fact possess inward knowledge."³⁹ The personality cult surrounding Ali and his successors has opened the door for many practices not acceptable to orthodox Islam.

Sufi Islam

Sufism represents a template or overlay upon Islam, as well as a subdivision of the faith. *Sufis* are often called the mystics of the religion and come from both the *Sunni* and *Shi'ite* camps.⁴⁰ Ernst estimates about half of all Muslims today practice a form of *Sufism*.⁴¹ Karrar asserts that almost all of Islam in Sudan is based upon it.⁴² Parshall claims folk Islam cannot be understood apart from *Sufism*.⁴³

According to Chittick there are two principle kinds of *Sufis*: (1) God-intoxicated and (2) contemplative. The former often display ecstatic

³⁵ The *Karajiites* repudiated both Ali and his *Sunni* successor, Mu'awiyya. *Kharijites* (i.e. Seceders) continue in small communities in North Africa (Braswell, *Islam: Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*, 95–96).

³⁶ Sookhdeo, *Global Jihad*, 131–32.

³⁷ L. B. Hamada, *Understanding the Arab World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 117.

³⁸ A. S. Ahmed writes, "An *Imam* is a senior figure often in charge of a large mosque. The title of *Imam* is also given to highly respected spiritual figures directly descended from the Prophet who are the basis for twelve *Imam Shi'ism*." (*Islam Today: A Short Introduction to the Muslim World* [London: I.B. Taurus, 2001], 9).

³⁹ Nasr, *Islam*, 11–12.

⁴⁰ Marshall, Green, Gilbert, *Islam at the Crossroads*, 28. I believe *Sufis* can be viewed as the "charismatics" of Islam in more than one way. *Sufis* introduced mysticism to their religion, stressing feelings and emotions (Braswell, *Islam: Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*, 97). Just as charismatic beliefs can be found within most branches of Christianity, so *Sufism* is present within most of the Muslim subdivisions.

⁴¹ C. W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), xiii.

⁴² A. S. Karrar, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan* (London: C. Hurst, 1992), 2.

⁴³ Parshall, *Bridges to Islam*, 12.

behavior while the latter spend time pondering the inner life.⁴⁴ *Sufism* developed in the eighth century through teachers such as Junaid who attempted to combine asceticism and mysticism with a proper observance of *Sharia*.⁴⁵ Ruthven says,

They came to be known as *Sufis*, after the woolen garments (*suf*=wool)⁴⁶ allegedly worn by the early exemplars of this movement, as well as by the followers of Jesus whom they particularly admired.⁴⁷

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1084–1111) brought *Sufism* to respectability. Ghazali believed both in the necessity of ritual and feeling.⁴⁸ He held that religious certainty depends on religious experience.⁴⁹ Although never founding a *Sufi* brotherhood (i.e. *tariqa*⁵⁰ or *Sufi* order),⁵¹ Ruthven states, “he has been called the greatest Muslim after Muhammad.”⁵²

Sufi ‘doctrine’ can best be gleaned from reading their aphorisms and poetry. *Sufi* (and many *Shi’a*) writers practice an allegorical hermeneutic called *tawil*⁵³ that is generally rejected by *Sunnis*.⁵⁴

Chittick points out there are three major Qur’anic themes in ancient Islamic teaching: (1) submission (i.e. *islam*), (2) faith (i.e. *iman*), and (3)

⁴⁴ W. C. Chittick, *Sufism: a Short Introduction* Oxford: One World. 2000), 29.

⁴⁵ Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 227.

⁴⁶ Ernst proposes another origin of the word; “the term *Sufi* was linked with the Arabic word *suffa* or bench (source of the English word *sofa*)” (*Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 22).

⁴⁷ Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 221–222.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁴⁹ Braswell, *Islam: Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*, 98

⁵⁰ *Tariq* or *tarik* is Arabic for “way, road, highway, trail, track, path, track, or path.” *Tariqa* or *tarika*, are derivatives and mean “manner, mode, means, way, method, procedure, system, creed, faith religion, religious brotherhood, or dervish order” (Wehr 1976:559).

⁵¹ Al-Sanusi (d. 1859) compiled a list (in Ernst, *Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 112–113) of the forty traditional *Sufi* orders. The forty Sacred [*Sufi*] Traditions of the nineteenth century are still preeminent (L. Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest* [New York: Avon Books, 1976], 7). New *Sufi* brotherhoods, however, continue to be founded as individuals receive new visions, revelations, and commissions from the Prophet (Ausenda, *Leisurely Nomads*, 444).

⁵² Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 35.

⁵³ *Tawil* is the common Arabic word for “long, large, big, tall, high” (Wehr 1976:576). *Sufis* use the word in the sense of the ‘larger, greater, and deeper’ meaning.

⁵⁴ Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 232.

doing the beautiful (i.e. *ibsan*).⁵⁵ *Sufism* sees the latter, doing the beautiful, as its “special domain.”⁵⁶

Nasr identifies the essence of *Sufism* as a meditation called *al-dhikr* (remembrance).⁵⁷ *Dhikr* ritual requires the *Sufi* to repeat the ninety-nine names of God to unlock the special meaning within each name, producing a spiritual state.⁵⁸ This is often performed with ritual ecstatic dancing performed by the ‘whirling dervishes’ repeating the *tahlil* formula.⁵⁹ This mandatory recitation of God’s ninety-nine names (*dhikr*) sets the *Sufis* apart.⁶⁰

Sufis are also known for their pursuit of esoteric knowledge called ‘*arif*’⁶¹ (or *Gnostic*). Ernst says, “the preferred term was *ma’rifa* or ‘*irfan*,’⁶² meaning a special knowledge or *gnosis* that transcended ordinary reality.”⁶³ An emphasis upon discipleship also characterizes *Sufism*.⁶⁴ “He who has no *Shaykh*, his *Shaykh* is Satan” is a commonly quoted aphorism.⁶⁵ New initiates take an oath of fealty to God, Islam, and their *sheikh*. Ausenda states, “The *Sufi sheikh* is the intermediary between his followers and God.”⁶⁶ These *sheikhs*, especially the departed ones,⁶⁷ are believed to possess a force known as *baraka*.⁶⁸

This power can include such unusual abilities as thought-reading, healing the sick, reviving the dead, controlling the elements and animals, flying, walking on water, shape-shifting,

⁵⁵ Chittick, *Sufism*, 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁷ Nasr, *Islam*, 81.

⁵⁸ Ahmed, *Islam Today*, 50.

⁵⁹ The *tahiil* formula is, “*la ilaha il-la allah*: ‘There is no deity but God.’” (In Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 255).

⁶⁰ Chittick, *Sufism*, 57.

⁶¹ ‘*Arif* is derived from the Arabic word *arafa*, “to know”. The term also means “expert, master, or connoisseur” (Wehr 1976:607).

⁶² Both *ma’rifa* (knowledge) and ‘*irfan* (gnosis) are also derivatives of ‘*arafa*, the Arabic word ‘to know’ (Wehr 1976:605, 606).

⁶³ Ernst, *Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 28.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

⁶⁵ Abu Yazid al-Bitami in Karrar, *Sufi Brotherhoods*, 2.

⁶⁶ Ausenda, *Leisurely Nomads*, 449.

⁶⁷ The *Hadendoa* Beja believe the souls of dead *sheikhs* have supernatural powers (Ausenda, *Leisurely Nomads*, 437).

⁶⁸ Hiebert, Shaw, Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 136. When used religiously “*baraka*” is usually translated as either spiritual “power” or “blessing” (in Wehr 1976:54).

and bilocation. *Sufi* theorists often warned that miracles were temptations by which God tested the adept.⁶⁹

Orthodox Islam resists the claims of the *Sufis*, believing divine revelation has ceased.⁷⁰ “Most of the leading [*Sufi*] *sheikhs* claim to receive their vocations, or confirmations of them, directly from God or the Prophet in dreams and visions.”⁷¹ Such an event occurred in Sudan relatively recently. In 1951 at the age of twenty-one, Sheikh Ali Betai began a preaching ministry in eastern Sudan calling on followers to repeat the *shahada*⁷² thirty times, read the Qur’an, and recite thirteen times, “Thanks be to God.”⁷³ The young mystic claimed to have seen the Prophet in numerous dreams. The *Sheikh* died in 1978, and his son Suleiman Ali Betai took his place.⁷⁴

Many *Sufi* folk practices in Sudan center on the *faki*,⁷⁵ or traditional healer. The word is similar to the term *fakir* (i.e. poor man).⁷⁶ Among the Beja and other Sudanese tribes, the *faki* is revered and often also holds the office of *sheikh*.⁷⁷ Jacobson says, “Although a *fagir* in the Red Sea Hills [Beja territory] sometimes uses herbal remedies, they mainly em-

⁶⁹ Ernst, *Shambala Guide to Sufism*, 68.

⁷⁰ Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 247.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁷² The first pillar of Islam is the repetition of the *Shahada*: “There is no God but God and Muhammad is the Prophet of God.”

⁷³ Ausenda, *Leisurely Nomads*, 446.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 444–46. While in Hamash Koreb in 1991 I sought out Suleiman Ali Betai. My family and I met with the *sheikh* and his followers in Kassala, Sudan later that year.

⁷⁵ A Sudanese Arabic term for *fakir* “It [*fiki, faki, fagir or fakir*] is generally rendered in English as a holy man or religious leader and is used, indifferently to describe the Head of a religious sect big or small, the guardian of a holy tomb, a man of well known piety who has no particular diocese or religious function, a curer and a school master of a *Khalwa* or Koran school” Hussey (1923:35).

⁷⁶ The term *fakir* (poor man) describes anyone who is a member of a *Sufi tariqa* (sometimes spelled *fagir*). A female is a *fakira* or *fagira*.

⁷⁷ Ausenda, *Leisurely Nomads*, 425. Karrar writes about the levels of *sheikhs*; “Al-Mirghani distinguishes between three grades (*maratib*, sg. *martaba*) of *shaykh*. The first and most sublime was that of *shaykh al-tahqiq*, namely one who had attained complete spiritual truth and was qualified to lead aspirants toward that goal... The second category was the *Shaykh al-tabarruk*, a general title adopted by al-Mirghani for his representatives, who derived their position and *baraka* from him... The last grade in al-Mirghani’s category of *shaykhs* was that of *shaykh al-qira’a*, i.e., teacher of the Qur’an or other Islamic sciences...” (*Sufi Brotherhoods*, 126).

ploy treatment by the Qur'an in their practice."⁷⁸ Cures include drinking Qur'anic pages to cure various maladies and using the book as a charm to keep away evil spirits.

Traditional Religious Influences on Folk Islam

The second stream that feeds into folk Islam includes traditional religious practices, especially in Africa. Moyo says, "For the masses of Muslim Africans, African traditional beliefs and practices have continued, although with some adaptations to conform to similar practices in Islam."⁷⁹

Kapteijns describes the Beja people of Sudan as "'mixers,' retaining many non-Islamic customary practices."⁸⁰ Jacobsen states "Beja people very much live in a world in which spirits are present."⁸¹ They call the *jinn*⁸² "ins," not desiring to risk offense by verbalizing their true names.⁸³ The Beja employ numerous folk practices to counter these *jinn*. After speaking about illness many Beja spit on the ground, asking for God's protection from evil.⁸⁴ Traditionalists hang a decorated straw mat or an embroidered blanket on their walls to repel the *jinn*.⁸⁵ Most Beja children wear amulets to protect against spirit attack and the evil eye.⁸⁶ Halim (1939:28) records traditional healers fumigating patients with chameleon or hedgehog skin in order to counteract fevers caused by demonic activity.⁸⁷

⁷⁸ F. F. Jacobsen, *Theories of Sickness and Misfortune among the Hadendoa Beja of the Sudan* (London & New York: Kegan Paul International, 1998), 67.

⁷⁹ A. Moyo, "Religion in Africa," in *Understanding contemporary Africa* (3rd ed. eds. A. A. Gordon and D. L. Gordon; Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 323.

⁸⁰ L. Kapteijns, "The Historiography of the Northern Sudan from 1500 to the Establishment of British Colonial Rule: A Critical Overview," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 22.2 (1989): 254.

⁸¹ Jacobsen, *Sickness and Misfortune*, 69.

⁸² The *jinn* are the spirits in Islam. Usually evil, sometime capricious, dealing with the *jinn* is the subject of much Beja folk Islam.

⁸³ Jacobsen, *Sickness and Misfortune*, 150–51.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁸⁵ Ausenda, *Leisurely Nomads*, 414–15.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 150–51. They keep their number of children and animals secret due to the fear of the evil eye (*Ibid.*, 33, 46, 171).

⁸⁷ A. A. Halim, "Native Medicine and Way of Treatment in the Northern Sudan," *Sudan Notes and Records* 22 (1939): 28.

In addition to *jinn* and devils, Beja folk Islam adds other spiritual beings to their faith schema. These divinities are called ‘spirit humans’⁸⁸ and may alternately benefit or harm tribe members.⁸⁹ These include *Were-hyenas*, who transform themselves back and forth between animals and humans, frighten many Beja.⁹⁰ While working with the Beja people of Sudan, I noticed their religion was similar to the ATR I observed among the Sukuma tribe of Tanzania. Methods for reaching folk Muslims with the Gospel must be calibrated for an encounter with an Islam differing from Qur’anic orthodoxy.



Beja Wedding, Jumping

Current Contextualization Approaches with Muslims

Byang H. Kato defines contextualization as “...making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation.”⁹¹ Hesselgrave and Rommen declare “there is not yet a commonly accepted definition of the word *contextualization*, but only a series of proposals, all of them vying for acceptance.”⁹² Numerous proposals for finding ‘common ground’ when evangelizing non-Christian faiths have been proposed.⁹³ This “fulfillment approach,”

⁸⁸ Most Beja dismiss the notion of ‘spirit humans’ as ancestors. I asked an English speaking Beja leader residing in the USA about these spirit humans. Ibrahim said they are not *jinn* but “helpers of the *jinn*” (Ibrahim 2010). These spirits could be classified as ‘familiar spirits.’

⁸⁹ Jacobsen, *Sickness and Misfortune*, 58.

⁹⁰ Ausenda, *Leisurely Nomads*, 429.

⁹¹ In Hesselgrave & Rommen, *Contextualization*, 33.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 35 (authors’ italics).

⁹³ D. J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 100.

as Hesselgrave calls it, seeks to meet humankind's yearning for God.⁹⁴ Another method, the "similarity approach"⁹⁵ seeks to discover redemptive analogies⁹⁶ and cultural points of contact to find 'common ground' with adherents of non-Christian religions.

Musk says, "While such bridging movements may be meaningful to the intellectual Muslim, they fall a long way short of communicating with Muslims committed to a folk-Islamic worldview."⁹⁷ Schlorff goes even further, stating, "Contextualization is not the key whatever the model is followed."⁹⁸ Apologetic, polemic and dialog techniques possess some value for the educated elite who holds to Islamic orthodoxy and can read the Qur'an.⁹⁹ Since all of these methods have failed to reach folk Muslims (and for that matter, orthodox Muslims) in great numbers other avenues need to be explored.¹⁰⁰

A Worldview Contextualization Approach with Folk Muslims

Since the 1930's Christian workers have largely ignored the issue of folk Islam.¹⁰¹ An appeal toward the heart requires a focus on the worldview¹⁰² of the folk Muslim.

Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou present a three-fold model for observing cultural religious values.¹⁰³ They state that whereas most Westerners function out of a sense of guilt, traditional societies (like the Beja) operate out of fear of the supernatural. These authors postulate that group societies (like Middle Eastern Muslims) follow a shame-honor orientation. Muller uses this model to further analyze cultures.

When analyzing a culture, one must look for the primary cultural characteristic, and then the secondary ones. As an example, many North American Native cultures are made up of elements

⁹⁴ Ibid., 100, 102.

⁹⁵ This is the classification of Hesselgrave, *Paradigm*, 102.

⁹⁶ Concepts in a host culture that can be used to illustrate the Christian Gospel message.

⁹⁷ Musk, *Holy War*, 285.

⁹⁸ S. Schlorff, *Missiological Models in Ministry to Muslims* (Upper Darby, PA: Middle East Resources, 2006), 161.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 58.

¹⁰⁰ Pikkert, *Protestant Missionaries*, 187.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 277.

¹⁰² Hiebert (2008:15) defines worldview as the "fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives."

¹⁰³ Hiebert, Shaw, Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 226.

of both **(1) shame-based** and **(2) fear-based cultures**. On the other hand, much of North American culture has been made up almost exclusively of **(3) guilt-based** principles, although this has changed in the last two decades.¹⁰⁴

In addition to these three worldviews, I see a fourth cultural religious value present among folk Muslims, especially *Sufis*—the ‘existential-transcendent’ worldview. This section evaluates the four religious value axes as to their suitability with folk Muslims.

Guilt-Innocence Worldview Axis

A guilt-innocence theme dominates many propositional Gospel presentations such as Campus Crusade’s the *Four Spiritual Laws*, the Billy Graham Association’s *Steps to Peace with God*, and the Navigators’ *Bridge to Life*. The concept of guilt and innocence before God characterizes not only a legitimate religious world-view value but Biblical truths that must be communicated to all. The *Chicago statement on inerrancy* states, “We affirm that the Bible expresses God’s truth in propositional statements, and we declare that Biblical truth is both objective and absolute.”¹⁰⁵ Although propositional constructs should supplement other methods when communicating with folk Muslims, the truth embedded within cognitive arguments must be conveyed.

Shame-honor Worldview Axis

Patai claims “in Arab culture, shame is more pronounced than guilt.”¹⁰⁶ Missiologists such as Musk and Muller believe the Gospel should be contextualized in the Middle East to meet the “culture-driven needs by focusing on Christianity’s answer to issues of honor and shame.”¹⁰⁷

Since the Bible addresses the shame-honor worldview inherent in the Muslim perspective, the Christian must discover the Biblical parallels. For instance, in John 8:3–11 a woman caught in adultery receives forgiveness from Jesus rather than the stoning required by Jewish and Islamic law. In another section Jesus says (in Luke 6:27b–29a), “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you,

¹⁰⁴ Muller, *Honor and Shame*, 20 (bolding and numbering mine).

¹⁰⁵ In Hesselgrave, *Paradigms*, 268.

¹⁰⁶ R. Patai, *The Arab Mind* (rev. ed.; New York: Hatherleigh, 1983), 113.

¹⁰⁷ In Pikkert, *Protestant Missionaries*, 177–78.

pray for those who mistreat you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also.”

These verses resonate in a shame-honor culture, while simultaneously confronting their core presuppositions. Pikkert states, “The most common reason why Muslims become Christians is the person of Jesus Christ, sometimes through fascination by the Qur’an’s testimony about Him.”¹⁰⁸ One of the national leaders in Sudan told me that he came to faith because Jesus taught forgiveness rather than taking revenge.¹⁰⁹

Fear-power Worldview Axis

Concerning cultures that see the world as a battle between competing supernatural forces, Muller observes, “The paradigm that these people live in is one of fear versus power.”¹¹⁰ In this worldview a close relationship exists between both ‘power over’ and ‘fear of’ the supernatural.

Kraft, Peter Wagner and John Wimber developed the idea into a controversial movement known as ‘third wave Pentecostalism.’¹¹¹ Hesselgrave explains:

Included are such supernatural phenomenon as healing the sick, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, exorcising demons and territorial spirits, neutralizing poisonous bites, overcoming Satanic attacks of various kinds, and even **raising the dead**. Related practices include concerted prayer and fasting, the laying on of hands, anointing with oil, the use of special handkerchiefs and other objects, **slaying in the spirit, spiritual mapping**, and prayer walking.¹¹²

Many Scriptures speak to the reality of spiritual warfare. Jesus said in John 3:8b “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil.” Ephesians 6:10–12 exhorts the believer to do battle with supernatural forces. The question centers on the kind of power to be exercised. If the missionary attempts to match the magician

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 192.

¹⁰⁹ Author’s interview with H. Jonadab, 8 Jan, 2006, Khartoum, Sudan.

¹¹⁰ R. Muller, *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door* (Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris, 2000), 42.

¹¹¹ This term is synonymous with Neo-Pentecostalism in many parts of the world (Bledsoe 2010:14, 25, 43). Bledsoe (2010) says that third-wave Pentecostalism (i.e. Neo-Pentecostalism) includes groups that have clearly gone beyond what most evangelicals would consider orthodox.

¹¹² Hesselgrave, *Paradigms*, 268. Italics mine.

miracle-for-miracle then he or she becomes like another sorcerer displaying power rather than a messenger bringing the Gospel. Even Jesus refused the devil's request that He perform displays of power in Luke 4:12.

Hiebert, Shaw and Tienou stress that pointing to the preeminence of the cross better represents the Gospel than manifestations of power. Miraculous displays do not necessarily result in belief.¹¹³ Even the magicians of Egypt replicated the plagues (Exodus 7:22) that God produced through Moses, yet Pharaoh was not convinced. Hiebert, Shaw and Tienou remind us that no phenomena is self-authenticating, rather "miraculous healings, speaking in tongues, exorcism, prophecies, resurrections, and other extraordinary experiences are reported in all major religions."¹¹⁴ Much has been written about power encounters but reports of their occurrence are anecdotal and sporadic.¹¹⁵ I believe God manifests His power, but He utilizes the miraculous as more an ancillary method than a primary strategy.

Although many conversion testimonies from former Muslims attest to dreams and visions,¹¹⁶ a word of caution is in order. All spiritual experiences should be evaluated by Scripture. 1 John 4:1 warns, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." Several of the Muslim converts associated with my work in North Africa attest that dreams¹¹⁷ peaked their interest in Christianity. None, however, reported seeing Jesus. One must be cautious about identifying every 'man in white' in a vision or dream as Jesus Christ. Ausenda reports that since boyhood, the Prophet Mohammad appeared in the dreams of the Beja *Sufi Sheikh* Ali Betai.¹¹⁸ Upon reaching adulthood, Betai proclaimed to the Beja people the content of his special dreams.

¹¹³ Hiebert, Shaw, Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 374.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 374–75.

¹¹⁵ Hesselgrave, *Paradigms*, 179.

¹¹⁶ P. Pikkert, *Protestant Missionaries to the Middle East: Ambassadors of Christ or Culture?* (Hamilton, ON: WEC-Canada, 2008), 195, and Musk, *Holy War*, 304.

¹¹⁷ 'Isa dreamed that a giant wooden cross hit him on the forehead and woke him up. This happened three times in succession. 'Isa asked a Christian worker under my supervision what this meant. He replied, "I think God is trying to get your attention" ('Isa 2006). 'Isa met with my friend and became a believer. Months later I attended 'Isa's baptism in the Red Sea.

¹¹⁸ Ausenda, *Leisurely Nomads*, 444.

I saw him [Muhammad] face to face. The Prophet lit the whole countryside, and I saw with my eyes many people with him; all the good men from early times, now dead. The Prophet said to me: "Build a mosque here in this place."

God brings power encounters at the time and place of His choosing. Christian workers who attempt to encourage others to seek these encounters risk falling prey to the very folk practices they desire to expose.

According to Musk, "Ideal Islam has no resources to deal with the everyday concerns and nightly dreads of ordinary Muslims."¹¹⁹ The question then surfaces, what is the best approach to reach folk Muslims?

The apostle (in 1 John 4:18) speaks directly to the fear-power paradigm; "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love." 1 John 5:8 confronts the ATR worldview with these words; "For there are three that testify; the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement."

This passage addresses all three worldviews. First, the blood addresses the guilt-innocence worldview by fulfilling the forensic legal demands of a blood sacrifice. Second, the water represents baptism; symbolizing a public identification with Christ and humility before God, which deals with shame-honor concerns. Third, the Spirit of God who honored Christ at His baptism (John 1:32–33) stands in clear contrast to the spirits of ATR. This three-fold testimony¹²⁰ conquers the 'world'¹²¹ and the spiritual forces of ATR.

Existential-Transcendent Worldview Axis

There is a strain within folk religion that searches for significance. This 'felt need' for spirituality constitutes the 'existential-transcendent' worldview axis. Formal Islam emphasizes God's transcendence over His

¹¹⁹ Musk, *Holy War*, 259.

¹²⁰ Westcott (1892:181, bold mine) supports this interpretation: "There can be no doubt that the Death upon the Cross satisfies the conception of 'coming by blood.' By so dying the Lord made known His work as Redeemer; and opened the fountain of His life to men. The 'coming by water,' which naturally corresponds to this final act of sacrifice, **is the Baptism**, whereby the Lord declared His purpose 'to fulfill all righteousness' (Matt. iii.15)."

¹²¹ Westcott (1892:179) writes, "Under the title 'the world' St. John gathers up the sum of all the limited transitory powers opposed to God which make obedience difficult."

immanence.¹²² While many solve their middle-level problems by ATR-like practices, others follow the *Sufi* path.

Sufis have been called the mystics of Islam,¹²³ longing for a personal relationship with God.¹²⁴ Parshall claims, “The Muslim mystic hopes, even in this mortal life, to win a glimpse of immortality.”¹²⁵ In their eagerness to follow God in a disciplined way, individual *Sufis* submit to a mentor (*Shaykh*) for guidance.¹²⁶ As the Christian challenges the *Sufi* to follow the ‘Master Teacher’ in discipleship, the words of Jesus speak to the everyday needs of folk Muslims.

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and ‘you will find rest for your souls.’ For My yoke is easy and My burden light. My yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28–30).

Sufism also contains a concept similar to Christianity’s ‘new birth.’ When taking on the ‘way of *Sufism*’ (*tasawwuf*), the new initiate ‘dies to self’ (*fana*, self-extinction) in order to ‘live to God’.¹²⁷ This new ‘life in God,’ *baqa* (subsistence) allows the *Sufi* to be “perfected, transmuted and eternalized through God and in God.”¹²⁸ In John 3:3 Jesus remonstrates the Jewish ruler Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Some *Sufis* refer to this mentioned passage and the ‘born twice’ concept in their quest for spiritual truth.¹²⁹

Sufi respect for the Biblical characters in the Qur’an offers common ground. Most Muslims think highly of Jesus and many who become Christians do so because of the lofty description of Him in the *Qur’an*.¹³⁰ *Sufis* especially revere Christ. The *Sufi* poet Al-Hallaj “looked to Jesus as

¹²² K. Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford, UK: One-world, 1997), 9.

¹²³ Sookhdeo, *Global Jihad*, 167.

¹²⁴ O. B. Jenkins, *The Path of Love: Jesus in Mystical Islam* (Nairobi: Communication Press, 1984), 7.

¹²⁵ Parshall, *Bridges to Islam*, 13.

¹²⁶ Karrar, *Sufi Brotherhoods*, 152.

¹²⁷ Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 228.

¹²⁸ A. J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950), 58.

¹²⁹ Chittick, *Sufism*, 138. According to Chittick some *Sufis* suggest that the ‘born again’ concept is similar to the *hadith*’s ‘die before you die’ prescription.

¹³⁰ Pikkert, *Protestant Missionaries*, 192–93.

the supreme example of glorified, perfected humanity; as the actualizer of this Qur'anic concept of the image of God in man."¹³¹

In addition, *Sufis* possess quite a developed theology of spiritual 'veils.' Veil theory in *Sufism* flows from interpretations of fourteen occurrences of the Arabic verb *kashf* (remove) in the Qur'an. Chittick says that symbolic death (death to self) and literal death are considered veils and "the quest for voluntary death is one of the basic themes of *Sufi* literature."¹³²

True *Sufis* experience the lifting of the veil in this life described in paradoxical imagery.¹³³ Ibn Arabi portrays the entire universe as a veil.¹³⁴ He further describes the goal of the *Sufi* path as obliteration "through which all awareness of the individual self is erased by the intensity of the unveiling."¹³⁵ The Christian worker should refer to the Bible passages¹³⁶ about veils and apply the analogies for salvation.

The *Sufi* should be challenged to turn to the Lord through Christ, remove the veil, behold God's glory, receive the Holy Spirit, and be transformed into conformity with God's image. The Apostle Paul writes (in 2 Corinthians 3:16) "but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away." The *Sufi* should also be told that only the believer in Jesus can experience real unveiling and view God's true glory. Hebrews (10:19–20) says, "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated through the veil, that is, his flesh."

CONCLUSION

Hesselgrave observes, "A mind-boggling variety of approaches to 'disciplining the nations' has been advocated during the era of modern missions."¹³⁷ This article asks what evangelistic approaches are most appropriate for reaching folk Muslims?

¹³¹ Jenkins, *Path of Love*, 27–28.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid. 139–140.

¹³⁴ In *ibid.*, 147.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 149. Arberry writes that some *Sufis* "introduced **the Logos doctrine into Islam**, by which is meant the theory that God's vice-regent controlling the material universe is 'the Idea of Muhammad'" (*Sufism*, 93, bolding mine).

¹³⁶ The Apostle Paul's 'veil passage' in Second Corinthians 3:7–4:4, a portion of which is quoted above, contains some parallel Christian mystical thoughts which should intrigue the *Sufi* seeker.

¹³⁷ Hesselgrave, *Paradigms*, 184.

Some evangelists have formulated polemic arguments in order to refute Islam. In addition, current trends in contextualizing Muslim forms and Qur'anic passages are troubling. Trial-and-error experimentation with Islamic religious structures and Qur'anic interpretation has often resulted in syncretism or confusion. The debate on the use or non-use of all these methods is a moot point with regard to popular Islam. Such questions rarely cross the minds of folk Muslims. Since the majority are folk Muslims, I propose approaches contextualized to their unique worldview.

Hiebert, Shaw and Tienou say a "worldview theme that runs through nearly all folk religious belief systems is near constant fear and the need for security."¹³⁸ The Gospel of Christ alone possesses the power to liberate those held captive in terror. 1 John (4:18) states, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love." Traditional religion must be confronted for it belongs to the kingdom of darkness and "is non-ethical and non-accountable. In essence, it is a manifestation of mankind's subservience to the Evil One."¹³⁹

Folk Islam contains elements of all three major religious values (guilt-innocence, shame-honor, fear-power), but I insist that traditional religion influenced folk Muslims hold primarily to a fear-power paradigm. *Sufis*, however, possess a distinct worldview I call the existential-transcendent religious value axis. Reaching *Sufis* requires appealing to their desire for a deeper spiritual life.

Folk Islam demands examination because most Muslims live outside the Arab world and practice popular forms of Islam. Christians engaging folk Muslims should aim at the heart and not only for the intellect. Individuals come to Christ as they respond to fulfilling God-given felt needs. As Christian workers concentrate on the everyday concerns of folk Muslims, more of them will come to know Christ personally and Biblically.

¹³⁸ Hiebert, Shaw, Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 87.

¹³⁹ Musk, *Holy War*, 115.