



*Folk Islam*

Fatima who continually worried about her newborn son being kept safe and healthy placed scissors next to him whenever he was sleeping. “Why do you do that, Fatima?” I asked. “I don’t know. It’s just what we do in our culture,” she responded. “But why scissors?” I pressed. “It has to be something metal,” she replied. Fatima was convinced that something metal beside her baby would ward off the jinn. Nothing else was powerful enough. Jinn, she told me, could not penetrate through metal. She told me of other protective measures like placing the hand over the baby’s mouth whenever the baby yawned. Without the covering of mom’s hand over the open mouth it gave opportunity for jinn to enter. “Sometimes new mothers smear black paint on their faces to ward off the jinn in my country,” she added. Fatima’s husband who is a university professor tried to speak some scientific logic to his wife who was new in my country but to no avail. They wanted me to pray a blessing over their baby. Before praying I removed the scissors but did not dispose of them and explained that Jesus Christ, not the scissors, has the power over all jinn and could truly protect their baby from harm because He loves baby Ahmed. It was Fatima’s first introduction to Jesus Christ.

When I was preparing nearly forty years ago for ministry among Muslim women what seemed most important to learn were facts about the religion of Islam. Nearly all the books I read revolved around the orthodox beliefs and religious practices of Muslims. However shortly after Ed and I arrived in Pakistan something other than orthodox beliefs and the religious practices of Muslims became evident. From my house I could see a grave of a man who had been known to have powers when alive where women would go and hang a piece of fabric from a tree branch representing their desperate prayer requests and when answered come back and tie a knot in the cloth. It appeared by the large number of strips of cloths that Muslim women really believed there was power emanating from the dead man. Other practices were evident. Babies would wear black eyeliner around their eyes and most of them would wear amulets around their necks. Bus drivers would hang a black cloth from their trucks to ward off accidents. Wearing amulets, visiting grave-shrines, following superstitions, and paying power

brokers for a desperate need appeared to play a prominent part in people's lives; maybe even more than performing the actual religious duties of Islam.

We served at a mission hospital where it could clearly be seen that Muslim women had a dependency on objects, people, and places to ensure protection and health. And yet there was no talk or orientation about this aspect of Muslim women's lives among the missionary colleagues. I was on my own to sort everything out. One particular incident really awakened me to this mystifying way of life. As a young mother in Pakistan I frequently visited the ward in the mission hospital to chat with the various female patients and relatives. A young woman patient was in obvious distress while her mother-in-law sat beside her. A Pakistani Christian nurse whispered to me, "Nothing is really wrong with the patient." That didn't make sense to me at all. I went into a quiet room and prayed a brief prayer for that lady and returned to her. Suddenly there she sat clothed in her right mind! When I asked what happened she said her mother-in-law wanted her son to have a different wife. She took her to a pir considered to be a holy man who had special powers who gave her a piece of paper with something written on it and made her drink it. The goal was to make her go crazy and hopefully die. *Could that really happen?* I wondered. *Is this part of Islam?* I hadn't studied about anything like what I just witnessed. That day I discovered more of the spiritual poverty and darkness surrounding me but also that praying in the name of Jesus had huge power! He really is the Savior and Deliverer that the Word of God says He is.

One may assume that once Muslim women cross the ocean and settle in western countries their superstitions, fears about protection, ways devised to avert bad luck or attain blessing, the deeply embedded belief of harm coming from the evil jealous eye, or visits to "power brokers" would discontinue or diminish but to my amazement such is not the case. My friend bought a new home. Before moving in she placed a mirror and a Qur'an above the fireplace and sprinkled salt on the floor, all to ensure a cleansing of the house from any evil presence. Another friend, married to a doctor, slaughtered a lamb and sprinkled some of the blood in the back yard to protect their expensive property. Many homes reveal protective charms hanging on their walls. Books on interpretation of dreams are consulted. Certain gold jewellery and rings are still worn for protection. Some of my friends put mini Qur'ans in their

babies' cribs. A little girl was dressed in boy's clothing to have her photo taken to fool the jinn that she was a girl. Mona was shocked when she saw two artificial yellow roses in a vase in my living room. The colour of yellow was believed to bring bad luck. Then the cushions on the couch were not sitting at the right angle indicating an omen. My Muslim women friends have changed geographical locations from east to west but their same world view often continues on. New forms of trying to control their personal lives may be added once they move to the west. Astrology and new age activities are frequently dabbled in as well as consulting the psychics in their communities. Surrounding themselves with "good energy" is becoming increasingly important to some women. There is a seductive attraction to whatever might avert bad luck, bring protection, healing, blessing, success, or give knowledge of the frightening unknown. Fears and superstitions and a deep yearning to manage and control their lives do not suddenly disappear by a geographical move.

If we can picture an iceberg it will help us to understand that just as there is an unseen part of an iceberg under the surface of the water, there is also a visible or seen part above the surface. In the world which Muslims live there are two faces of Islam, too. There is the visible face and the unseen face. The visible face of Islam includes their orthodox beliefs in Allah, angels, prophets, judgment, and the Qur'an. The visible face of Islam also includes their religious practices of confession, prayers, giving alms, fasting, and going on the hajj. Many Christians who want to engage in sharing Jesus Christ with Muslims fix their attention on learning everything possible about the visible face of Islam. However, as we live among Muslims and really get to know them we will encounter more of the hidden face of Islam which we often refer to as folk or popular Islam. Muslims will usually declare that folk Islamic activities are forbidden in true Islam. However much continues to be absorbed and incorporated into their everyday life and explained as "this is just part of our culture," or "my mother told me to do this." We will discover over time that even religious practices such as saying prayers, fasting, counting the amount of times remembering Allah and recording the number in a notebook and even how they handle their holy book or an esteemed poet's literature to ensure a prophetic blessing are sometimes used to appease bad luck happening to

them. If we are honest we might agree that some in our own faith community sometimes also use religious practices or even the Bible in the same way.

When we begin to notice that the world view of many Muslim women revolves around the activity of jinn whom they believe have the power to disrupt and disturb their lives and witness the myriad of ways how they try to be protected from them, a shift in how we engage with them starts to change dramatically. Suddenly that which we had not really noticed nor understood becomes more visible. We wonder how we missed seeing that realm! Most of us have not had many encounters with the realm of demonic or occult activity which creates much anxiety and fear in people. We have grown up from babyhood with being put to bed with soft Christian lullabies and have heard many times that Jesus loves us. We grow up feeling safe and secure in Jesus who is always with us and loves us. In contrast many Muslim women (but not all) feel that Allah is far away and unknowable. They do not know if Allah truly loves them or not. Many assume that if good things happen to them then Allah loves them. If bad things happen then they are not sure if he loves them. Many believe that if they perform their prayers faithfully and keep Ramadan diligently and wear the hijab that Allah will love them and bless them. Allah's love has to be earned and is conditional. When trials and suffering come we will frequently hear them declare, "It's an examination from Allah." There is little understanding that Jesus Christ is our Redeemer and can bring good out of bad as we read in Romans 8:28. We are blessed to know God as our heavenly Father who loves us unconditionally and Jesus is our Savior, Redeemer, Emmanuel, Peace, and the Holy Spirit is our Guide and Comforter. Imagine if we did not know this!

How do we communicate and explain these great Scriptural truths to Muslim women? First, we need to have compassion towards them, not condemnation or judgment, or even disdain. If I had been born in such spiritual poverty I may well be in their same situation. For years my list of Muslim women's fears and ways they try to manage them became longer and longer. The list is just different from our own. We have fears, too. Often this list of their fears was spoken about or distributed at meetings. One day a Christian lady commented that she just heard about the fears. She was correct. A lot of observation had been collected over the years but I lacked in understanding how to go beyond observing and collecting a longer list. We

need knowledge but we need more than that. We need to bring the knowledge and power of Jesus, our Savior and Deliverer, into their lives.

Amal was hospitalized for three days. Afterwards I asked her what had happened. “I went to the public swimming pool where another Muslim woman saw me. She told me, “I have been watching you. Your body is very beautiful.” As Amal walked out into the front lobby she fainted and an ambulance was called. Medical tests were done but the doctors could find no problem. “What do you think happened, Amal?” I asked. She hesitated to tell me thinking I would not understand or would think bad of her. I waited in silence for her to share. Finally she said, “I don’t know if you believe in the jealous eye.” She was convinced that the Muslim woman had been jealous of her body which had terrified her to the very core of her being, believing she would actually die. We talked awhile about the effects of jealousy and then I shared how once a person had been jealous of me and it had made me physically sick. Now she realized I understood and was not going to condemn her. “Would you ever tell a doctor what happened to you?” I asked Amal. “Never,” she replied. The fear of the jealous eye is indeed a heavy silent burden so many Muslim women carry. “Do you know that God is also jealous over you and is watching you, too?” I asked Amal. She was shocked and confused. “He loves you so much and is always watching over you in tenderness and love. You are very precious to Him. He doesn’t wish you harm. It’s a good pure jealousy,” I explained and read Romans 8: 35-39 and Psalm 121 to her. Often Psalm 139: 1-18 or one of Jesus’ miracles over evil spirits are shared. Carrying my Bible in my purse always means it is available to read from. “The next time you fear a person’s jealous eye call on the name of Jesus to help you,” I urged. “He will come to your rescue.” After praying for her she basked quietly in the moment contemplating on the new truth relayed to her.

It takes considerable time to observe and understand the part folk or popular Islam plays in their lives and then learn how to spiritually engage with Muslim women in this area. The way we engage with a Muslim woman will be different than with a woman who has come out of Islam to follow Jesus. First we have to introduce our Saviour, Jesus Christ, to them. When they move closer to following Jesus we explain how we live by faith and not by sight. As followers of Jesus they will not fully mature until they are able to release or renounce the

ways they have devised to control their lives. I have made mistakes along the way in this ministry. There have been believers who have asked me to dispose of their charms and I have done it for them. But that has not made them grow spiritually. It has not empowered them to take that step of faith. They have not gained total victory. Gradually I learned to be with them while they personally take that step of disposing or renouncing their charms. Growth and victory is much more obvious.

Not all believers grasp the dependencies they have placed on their charms or popular practices. Once there was a spiritual retreat for about thirty believers which I attended. The subject of recognizing dependencies on such things was brought up. I was asked to speak into the subject which seemed to produce confusion. The group became divided. Half said they were legitimate while the other half said the things needed to go. They could not unite on the issue. Finally, they suggested that the oldest expatriate person present who was in her seventies should decide the case. She did not know what to say as she was not experienced in such issues, but she thought perhaps it was a good idea to get rid of those things. All quieted down and they became united. Engaging with Muslims and followers of Jesus will require patience and wisdom as we walk with them encouraging them to transfer their dependency on the “extras” found in folk Islam to learning how to depend more and more on God Himself. How rewarding to witness believers grow in victory and transformation.