



Seeing better

What are we not seeing?

Walking around my Muslim-majority, inner-city neighbourhood in the UK I begin to notice hints of something interesting, something different. One whole exterior wall of a freshly painted house has the word Mashaalla¹⁵⁴ ما شاء الله expressed in Arabic script; the car parked outside another house boasts the number plate WAH 33D¹⁵⁵ whilst other cars have an image of the evil eye or the hand of Fatima dangling from the rear-view mirror. Entering my friends' houses the heady aroma of Bakhhoor/ounce¹⁵⁶ fills the air and invariably the only picture in the house is a calligraphic representation of the 99 names of God. Whilst we chat together my friend discreetly rubs the palms of her hands together, blows on them, whispers "bismillah"¹⁵⁷ and then strokes her grandchild affectionately. I begin to sense a recurring theme. Is it just the way people live, an expression of cultural background at play here or is there something more? What do these 'symbols' and actions tell me of what I am not seeing and not understanding?

It has been estimated that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Islamic world practice Folk/Popular Islam and this figure rises to 95% when related to women¹⁵⁸. In Islam, the excretion of bodily fluids is a cause of impurity. Since women, through normal life cycle events will be menstruating, pregnant, postpartum or breastfeeding, they will be producing these fluids and, as a result, their access to formal Islam is restricted. Women's regular state of impurity means that they have less opportunity to participate in religious activities such as mosque prayers, Qur'an reading, fasting and pilgrimage to the haj. This, linked to their greater responsibility in overseeing the health of family members and in the marking of rites of passage, means that they need to look for other means of gaining power and blessing from God as they navigate life. Women crave

¹⁵⁴ Mashaalla

¹⁵⁵ WAH 33D = this combination of letters and numbers spells out the word Wahid or Great, in Arabic, a definition and description of Allah

¹⁵⁶ Bakhhoor/ounce - incense sometimes made from frankincense gum.

¹⁵⁷ Bismillah is an invocation used by Muslim people "in the name of God"

¹⁵⁸ Phil Parshall(1983:16), Don McCurry (1980) In Rick Love (2000:22)

protection against the evil eye, spirits, ghosts, curses and sorcery by seeking the aid of Allah, angels, visiting saints' shrines, using charms, amulets and talismans, employing magic and other powers. The aim is to divert the powers circulating in the cosmos for their own purposes – whether to curse or to bless.

What we are not seeing in Scripture?

As Western people, we usually don't 'see' the spiritual forces around us. But there are clear Biblical accounts which show the spirit realm impacting both the physical realm and animals. God empowered Moses' staff to do miracles in Egypt. He spoke through Balaam's donkey and closed the mouths of the lions facing Daniel. Furthermore, the sick were healed and evil spirits were caused to come out of people by the laying on of Paul's handkerchiefs.¹⁵⁹ It appears that God can give His barakat/blessing through objects.

Having our eyes opened

Muslim communities in the West do not live in isolation from their communities of origin. As has been shown, close links with the countries of origin foster continuity of beliefs between these communities.¹⁶⁰

A single example will illustrate the point: Volunteers from church offered to run a Christingle making stall at our local primary school Christmas celebration day. As we stuck cocktail sticks lined with raisins and jellied sweets into the oranges and then made space for the candle in each orange to be lit we had the opportunity to talk about the real meaning of Christmas and the coming of Jesus as the Light of the World, ready to overcome the darkness. One little Somali boy piped up:

¹⁵⁹ Acts 19:12

¹⁶⁰ Dein in Najat Khalifa, Tim Hardie and Mohammad S I Mullick 2012 p. 6

“My daddy shines a torch and says a prayer in all the dark corners of our house every night before we go to bed, so we can sleep without being afraid.” Continuity of beliefs being practised in a provincial city of the UK, brought all the way from Somalia where the most respected anthropologist of Somali life wrote about jinn being creatures “who lurk in every dark and empty corner, poised and ready to strike capriciously and without warning.”¹⁶¹

My friends tell me that their remedy for limiting the anxiety and danger they feel from the evil eye includes reciting specific passages from the Qur’an. Ayat ul Kursi, surah Al fatiha, surah Al ikhlas, Al falaq and Al nas are all used. But what happens if you are either illiterate or unlearned, I wonder? Praying Tahajud – non-compulsory prayers sometime between midnight and dawn are said to be effective. This perspective is not limited to the socially conservative and less educated. A personal development Academy for the Muslim Ummah has a discussion page on "how to overcome the evil eye effects."¹⁶² It gives advice and invites feedback from readers on what works for them. Its 6-week masterclass on living the best version of yourself includes a session on “How to practically tap into the **Power of Barakah** to maximize the impact of your daily efforts.”

I’ve seen how many of my friends line their new born babies’ eyes with Kohl to make them look unattractive and so protect them from the eye of envy; how they hide their joy at the achievements of their children and their pleasure in having themselves succeeded in personal goals. They are living in a world of limited good where anyone who is seen to have more than their share of the finite good that there is in the world threatens the equilibrium of the community and so are exposed to the possibility of destructive envy on the part of another.

¹⁶¹ Lewis 1966:312 in Moratz, Yusuf and McClintock p.6

¹⁶² <https://productivemuslim.com/reader-discussion-evil-eye-effects/>

Having my eyes opened to this world view and its ramifications in the way that it robs people of fully enjoying life, manipulates them and keeps them captive to fear increases my passion and desire to see Muslim women come into the Life in all its fullness which Jesus came to bring¹⁶³. Life with Him in heaven, as opposed to the terror and darkness of hell-fire, yes, but life in all its fullness, too, in being released to enjoy all that God has given us without fear of some sort of balancing evil coming our way. This would be a freedom to revel in the beauty of creation, material resources God gives, family life, personal attributes which enable us to do well in our roles whether at home or at work and yes, simple, every day fun.

Seeing together

How can we speak into the lives of our friends who experience such vulnerability in not feeling protected? How can we show them that there is no need to build their own agency since God is with us and God is for us? How can we explain how Jesus is the blessing and gift of God to us? How can we speak of the rescuing, saving and keeping power of Jesus who has been given dominion over every power? How do we build confidence in Him? How can we teach them to come to Jesus when experiencing the negative power of spiritual forces in their lives? Rediscovering the way that the contest between good and evil is played out in events in the Bible is helpful. The plan of God to rescue and save us from the power of Satan is clear. Exploring the Prophets Stories from the Qur'an and the Bible together enable women to see how God rescued:

- ◆ Jonah and Noah from watery deaths
- ◆ Joseph, cursed by his family, so that he was able to say "You meant it for evil, but God turned it to good"¹⁶⁴
- ◆ Abraham's son from death through the miraculous provision of a ram

¹⁶³ John 10:10

¹⁶⁴ Gen. 50:20

- ◆ Moses, as a male baby, cursed to death by a powerful ruler but saved by godly midwives; and the blessing for his mother of a child returned to her
- ◆ The children of Israel, from the grip of slavery under an evil and manipulative power.

Sharing the birth narratives of both John the Baptist and Jesus with our friends could be instructive. There is the overturning of the curse of infertility for Elizabeth in God's gifting of John to her and Zechariah. He will be a "joy and delight"¹⁶⁵ to them but his coming will bring wider blessing in that he is also to make ready "a people prepared for the Lord"¹⁶⁶. Zechariah's prophetic song speaks of a coming rescue "from the hands of our enemies to enable us to serve him without fear"¹⁶⁷. Joseph is given the name of the child, Jesus, by an angel – the Greek form of the word Joshua meaning "he saves" and the shepherds hear that a Saviour has come. The presentation at the temple, forty days after Jesus' birth, gives further confirmation of this in Simeon's song of praise to God declaring: "my eyes have seen your salvation"¹⁶⁸. The angel visiting Mary tells her that her child will be the Son of the Most High, who will be given a throne and a kingdom which will never end. The wise men's gifts, denoting kingship as the expectation for this child, confirm this.

It is clear that God WILL save and that this plan to save is through Jesus.

I find that offering prayer in the name of Jesus is a powerful thing - laying the name of God on someone – and women often sense a huge peace immediately afterwards. The affirming power of touch and speaking words of blessing into women's lives are certainly Jesus - type activities we could emulate. And I have recently rediscovered a useful prayer from Scripture to offer: "May your good Spirit lead me on to level ground." Ps 143:7-9

¹⁶⁵ Luke 1:14

¹⁶⁶ Luke 1: 17

¹⁶⁷ Luke 1:74

¹⁶⁸ Luke 2:30

Seeing better

Whilst we are becoming increasingly familiar with seeing how the Bible is steeped in an honour/shame world view. It's also clear, as we've seen above, that there are power/fear perspectives to be delved into and shared with friends who are both seeking and starting on the long road of discipleship.

I find it significant that of the 3 instances when Jesus raised people from the dead all involved women - Mary and Martha, and the widow of Nain were rescued from the "death" of not being protected by a male family member. In raising Jairus' daughter from the dead Jesus asked someone to give her something to eat and so demonstrated that she was not a ghost.¹⁶⁹ His work was a miracle, not magic. She is literally rescued from the kingdom of darkness by the One who would later exercise the power and authority He has to call us out of darkness into His marvellous Light.¹⁷⁰

Jesus' rescue of women facing difficult circumstances can be further seen through:

- ◆ The woman crippled and healed on the sabbath had been "bound by Satan" but now set free¹⁷¹
- ◆ The woman caught in adultery who not only had the expectation of being condemned to death lifted but, through Jesus' words of forgiveness, was given the blessing of the opportunity of living a new life¹⁷²
- ◆ The woman with the issue of blood exercised agency and faith in reaching out to touch Jesus, robe – touching this person of power. Jesus "realizing that power had gone out from Him" insisted on finding the one who had accessed this power and spoke words of blessing to her "Go in peace, and be freed from your suffering"¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Mark 5:43

¹⁷⁰ 1 Peter 2:9

¹⁷¹ Luke13:10-17

¹⁷² John 8:1-12

¹⁷³ Mark5:24-34

- ◆ The Syro Phonecian woman, similarly exercised agency in first engaging with Jesus, on behalf of her daughter: “My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly”¹⁷⁴ Pursuing a solution from the power available seemingly to some but not to her, and gaining the rescue she craved: “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter”¹⁷⁵

Psalm 23 is a Psalm full of blessing and one which we would do well to share with new believers. K Bailey¹⁷⁶ shows how in all verses bar one¹⁷⁷ it is God who is the agent. He is the one who provides green pastures and still, not turbulent, waters. He restores (rescues) the soul and leads the sheep back from a lost state to the right path. And even when the sheep experiences danger fear is dispelled by God’s presence. His rod and staff are protection from external threat and assist the shepherd in rescuing sheep who find themselves in difficulty. And the promise of goodness and mercy “behind and before” me all the days of my life are a reminder that we are protected by God’s khesed – covenant faithfulness, loving kindness and grace. There is also a nice link with verses in Hebrews12:2 where Jesus is described as the “author and perfecter” of our faith. He has gone before, and He will be with us at the completion of our faith.

And for those who are taking first steps in faith and trust in Jesus, the liberator, the beginning of Luke’s gospel has a wonderful blessing spoken woman to woman which we would do well to mirror: “Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!”¹⁷⁸

Rejecting the darkness and claiming the Light together

As we have the joy of baptising an increasing number of believers from Muslim backgrounds in our western churches I wonder if we should start taking the statement in the (Anglican)

¹⁷⁴ Matt.14:22

¹⁷⁵ Mark7:29

¹⁷⁶ Bailey, K., The Good Shepherd. IVP. 2015:61

¹⁷⁷ Psalm23:4

¹⁷⁸ Luke1:45

Baptism service which speaks of renouncing the devil more seriously? Should we be sensitively and appropriately asking candidates in the preparation to the Baptism whether they have “anything to declare”? Are there talismans, beads, practices based in popular Islam which now need to be laid down? Have ties to persons of power been cut? Is our newly believing friend ready to surrender in prayer and faith to the superior authority and Lordship of Christ? Then, as their church community we can positively encourage them to **“Stand bravely against all the powers of evil and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.”**¹⁷⁹

Another question we could ask ourselves relates to redemptive elements in the use of power objects? In our church supporters will give a small wooden cross to the newly baptised. This can be discreetly held in the palm of the hand and secreted in a pocket of one’s clothing. Some have reported it being helpful when faced with anxiety or fearfulness to reach out for the cross, remember their new identity as being under the shadow of the cross rather than under the shadow of death and gain strength through prayer in the name of Jesus. Could we work with our friend to build up a blessing bank – sometimes used to encourage children to learn the joy of giving - but with the focus on the promises we have in Jesus? I have seen a beautifully framed calligraphic representation of the Lord’s prayer in a house. This attracts a lot of comment and interest from visiting friends. Could this positively replace the 99 Names of God plaques?

Where BMBs are part of the worshipping community in churches where infant baptism is a norm could we be more intentional about claiming this new child as now within the loving, protective care of the Father; under the shelter of His wing? Anointing the child with the sign of the cross with the words “Christ claims you for His own”¹⁸⁰ speaks loudly into the spiritual realm and giving the lighted candle reminds us of Christ conquering the darkness of evil.

¹⁷⁹ <https://www.churchofenland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/christian-initiation/holy-baptism-accessible-lanquaqe/holy-baptism>

¹⁸⁰ <https://www.churchofenland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/christian-initiation/holy-baptism-accessible-lanquaqe/holy-baptism>

Has the time come for us to be working with those who have themselves experienced rescue to create new rituals and power liturgy for life's rites of passage which will be bridges for others to engage with?

And now seeing into the spiritual realm, how do we pray?

Recently our local prayer group decided to spend some time in prayer for our Muslim friends who are engaged in these practices and bound and manipulated by the limiting power of Satan. We found that some of us were struggling for the words to say; I wondered: did we really have the language to use? If not, why not? Two areas of discomfort came to me as I reflected on this. There is a wariness of confusing the Christus Victor metaphor of Jesus' work on the cross with imperial privilege and superiority – especially when seeking to live in peace and engender respect for those of other faith in our pluralistic society. For some of us there has been a turning away from the emptiness of the triumphalism of more recent times as we've seen the struggles of the marginalized amongst whom we minister and worship, experienced for ourselves something of the messiness of life and found that lament and hope rather than shouts of declaration in the name of Jesus have sometimes been the more appropriate response. How do we be true to our call to follow Jesus example in eschewing power and victory for humility whilst at the same time proclaiming His rescuing, saving work? What are the words we can proclaim which are true and hold power without implication of either dominance or violence? Perhaps the words, sometimes called the 'mystery of faith' can help us; words at once simple and yet profound in their encompassing of the saving, rescuing, authoritative work of Christ.

“Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” They echo what has happened, and they speak to what will happen.

The Lord's prayer helps us in not only praying in supplication of but agreeing together in the expectation and certain hope that “Thy will be done, Thy Kingdom Come” in our friends' lives. And we look to the authority of Scripture which affirms and encourages us to see that “No eye has seen, nor ear heard the good ...for those whom the Lord loves” 1 Cor 9:10.