When Women Speak...

Folk Islam
There are two types of article in this webzine. In the shorter articles, authors reflect on their own experience. The longer articles are more academic and start with a summary (called an abstract).

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In this edition of the When Women Speak webzine we will explore women’s everyday experience of Islam.

In popular presentations of Islam, especially in the media, Islam is usually portrayed as a homogeneous monolith. Women’s experience of Islam is not differentiated from the monolith. Women are doubly hidden by the stereotype of being covered in long, black robes. In fact, not only is Islam diverse, but women’s experience is different to that of men because Islam is a gendered religion. This means that the experience of women is a story not often heard and their everyday practice of their religion is largely invisible outside their homes and communities. In this webzine we open the doors a little so that you can see the world of Muslim women’s lives more clearly.

Largely due to scholars’ bias towards written texts and formal study, it is generally argued that “true” religion is that which follows the rules, doctrines, and practices defined by the scholars of the religion. These scholars of religion are almost always male and have the luxury of being able to dedicate years of their lives to the study of texts and traditions. Such scholarship also gives the scholar status and authority. This authority is often used to proclaim everyday practices as “not true” or “folk”. The denigration of the practice of popular religion by calling it “folk” or syncretistic creates an unhelpful dichotomy between true and false, and theory and practice. In reality, the beliefs and practices that have been described as being part of “folk Islam” are actually the grounded experience of Muslims as they live out their faith in day-to-day life.

The vast majority of Muslim women are concerned to live out their faith with integrity and want God to intervene in their lives for the well-being of their families and communities. While they desire to follow the teachings of Islam, they are also very concerned with the health of family members and material needs. They look to God to provide for these needs but are often also concerned about malevolent powers which seek to do harm. The ways they attempt to acquire God’s blessing or protect themselves from evil powers are outlined in detail in the articles in this webzine, especially in the reflections of Joy Loewen, Inneke Riddell, Louise Simon, Vivienne Stacey and Miriam Williams. These combined reflections provide an overview of the everyday practices of Muslim women based on the experiences of women working across the world.
It can be difficult for the highly educated, especially people from the West, to accept the everyday experiences of the spiritual world in Muslim women’s lives. The modern, Western worldview focuses on the material world that can be explained and manipulated by science. As the world of spirits and spiritual forces cannot be seen or measured, the spiritual realm has been largely rejected. This has created a vacuum in the Western worldview. This vacuum has caused major problems for all Westerners working with majority world people. “Folk” religious practices have been rejected as superstitious and, therefore, the problems these practices seek to address have been considered imaginary and unimportant. Paul Hiebert first wrote about this problem in 1982. Ruth Adam explains its implications in more depth in her article on understanding and dealing with the spirit world. While Western Christians may be open to accepting the existence of spiritual beings, impersonal forces such as the evil eye can be difficult to engage with. Moyra Dale explores the relationship between the impersonal positive and negative powers of blessing and the evil eye, and how Christians can respond appropriately.

The impact of the spiritual realm in everyday life is felt keenly by Muslim women.

Christians working with Muslims need to appreciate the extent of the effects of spiritual beings and forces on everyday life. They also need to prepare relevant biblical responses which address the concerns and fears of the people they work with and which offer practical responses to replace the everyday Islamic practices. Words without the conviction brought by experience will quickly be sensed as being empty. Getting people to throw away their charms and forbidding their rituals without offering satisfying alternatives can result in a vacuum that leads people to return to their original practices. The authors of the articles in this webzine each offer recommendations based on their own experiences. May their experience guide you as you listen to Muslim women, learn from them and endeavour to introduce them to Jesus’ power to protect and bless them with all the riches of his heavenly realm.

Evelyn Hiebert
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.
Folk beliefs and practices
One day I had a sore arm, and everyone suggested massage, so I went for a walk according to the directions given and ended up in someone’s lounge room along with other people waiting for the ‘clever man’ to help them. I waited a long time. While waiting, the other patients were talking about their ailments. Unlucky in love, lost something, neighbours wishing them evil. This wasn’t what I was expecting at all. And I noticed the ‘clever man’ on the other side of the room, doing something over a glass of water. There was a little massage going on, but not much. I began to feel less and less comfortable, and finally oppressed by it all. Looking back, I would say I became aware of an evil power in the room. I finally jumped up and blurted out, ‘sorry, I’ve decided I don’t need the help offered here after all’ and rushed out the door into the street. I felt sullied by the experience. I spent time later that day confessing to God about getting close to meddling with evil powers. And finally, I felt the oppression lift.

After a friend’s mother died lots of very unusual things happened. For example, she would feel herself being thrown off her motorcycle. As she explained about those events she also explained that her mother had been some kind of spirit medium. At one point I asked why she only told me this after I’d known her family for many years and she said ‘oh, we knew you wouldn’t believe any of this’.

A new friend gave me a bird’s nest of an unusual shape. I hung it up in my house. People would look at it but avoided talking about it. Finally, another friend told me he was surprised I would use a talisman like that. A talisman? What? I had no idea. Of course, I wouldn’t have a talisman in my house! I was offended that people thought I would use any kind of talisman. Welcome to folk Islam or ‘traditional’ Islam. That is, Islam married to various pre-Islamic practices and beliefs. It’s easy to misunderstand these beliefs in spirits, powers, taboos as being illogical, mere superstition, ridiculous and empty, and not ‘real’ Islam. Or to fall into the other trap of considering these spirits, powers and taboos as all being demonic and needing to be exorcised. The truth is somewhere in-between.
Some writers about Islam, particularly when writing about these folk Islamic practices, point to the animistic milieu from which Islam arose in Arabia.\(^1\) In Indonesia, the worldview that Islam built on was an animistic one. Other academics point to the way Sufism (mystical Islam) appropriates an array of practices, including animistic ones when it contextualizes to the area it is entering.\(^2\) This is the way Islam entered Indonesia.\(^3\)

I don’t know about where you live but where I am even the followers of the reformed sects of Islam call in the witchdoctor to get rid of the stink-bean ghost who is stinking up the bathrooms at the university! I often ask people what they think about amulets. I hear a wide range of answers. I find that those who loudly decry relying on anything apart from prayer to Allah still have amulets in their homes. This brings me to the challenge of learning to think the way my local friends think. They are very adept at holding two mutually exclusive ideas together at the same time, which I am not good at yet. My local friends hold a strong conviction about the absolute power of God. They also hold strong convictions about using white and black magic, consulting mediums and spirits to achieve what they need in this life.

\(^3\) In addition to those two historical factors there is a third, more theological factor. Despite or perhaps because of the very strong belief in Allah/God and that He is completely in control, He mostly feels very far away and is not particularly approachable. Therefore, the daily felt needs of my neighbours and friends are met by beliefs and practices involving intermediary spirits and powers that are perceived to be more immediate. This is the summary of all I have read on the topic and my experience.
Folk Islam can be understood as belonging to the 'middle' spiritual ground between humans and a distant Allah, populated by spirits, witchdoctors, amulets, sacred trees, and accessed/manipulated by rituals, spells, taboos, charms in order to change the situations people find themselves in or for protection. The key words are 'fear' and 'power'.\(^4\) My local friends are generally very afraid of Allah, afraid of spirits, afraid of enemies casting spells against them. They seek help from practitioners and practices that have more power than they themselves do. These people range from 'clever' people to shamans and exorcists.

In my area these witchdoctors are usually men, and both women and men go to them for help. 'Clever' people have what the English call second-sight, and can see things that other people can’t, so one goes to them when something is lost. A shaman consults with ancestral spirits. An exorcist gets rid of evils spirits that are bothering someone. In other places folk Islamic practices predominate in women’s lives more than in men’s lives, due to women’s limited access to mosque-based forms of worship.\(^5\)


What do these folk Islamic practices look like where I live?

What I see everyday is:

- A special one-clove garlic pinned on to a baby's singlet for protection from spirits that babies are susceptible to.
- At dusk mothers take babies and small children inside, because that is when spirits are especially out and about.
- My friends won't go on a walk that goes through a graveyard.
- Witchdoctors are the first port of call who offer a range of help available from massage through love potions to exorcism.
- Sacred banyan trees are never cut down and become part of both the secular and religious history of an area. Roads and buildings go around them.
- Many taboos for pregnant women (e.g. not cutting their hair) and new mothers (e.g. many foods are avoided).
- Moringa leaves are taken to the witchdoctor to use in an exorcism.
- In one village there is a heavy sacred prophecy stone. People who want to know if their wishes for the near future will come about say a prayer before lifting it. If the stone can then successfully be lifted while thinking about the desired thing, the wish will come true.

Where do we go from here? What do we have to offer that is better? That overcomes fear? That brings God/Allah close to them? What offers dependable protection?

I always want to say 'just pray'. I have often said 'just pray', but my local friends tend to tune out of the conversation at that point. Because 'just pray' is not taking into account that these folk/animistic practices are hands-on, embodied, immediate, emotionally fulfilling and satisfying, whereas Allah feels far away. And that is why they are not 'just praying' in the first place!

In fact, we have the answer for that, in that in Jesus God is close to us. I was on a flight once next to a young Sufi man. When we talked about prayer and Allah his eyes lit up. He
understood the experiences of meeting Allah/God in prayer I was talking about, and I understood some of his. However, that has been the exception. Most of my local friends are not looking beyond their fears and circumstances to an encounter with their Creator, though that is something to keep praying for. I think it is important to keep talking about prayer and personal encounters with God (dreams, guidance, ‘words’, anything) while waiting for Him to open their hearts and minds to His loving immanence.

One reason my local friends turn to the witchdoctor for healing is that the medical system in many parts of Indonesia is dysfunctional at best. People feel hopeless and helpless at the hands of the medical personnel they can afford to consult. Many times, I hear that after going to the doctor a sick person will decide they are afraid of the treatment, afraid of an operation, or cannot afford it, and will take ‘kampong’ medicine instead. It seems that hearing just one story of a failed operation, for cataracts for example, will sometimes put people off having a similar procedure.

‘Kampong’ medicine could be herbal remedies, or magic or both. The herbal remedies are often pharmacologically sound. But others, such as putting a poultice of leaves chewed by the witchdoctor on a badly infected head wound in a baby, may not be. I am not yet able to distinguish between which traditional remedies are helpful, part of God’s provision in creation, and which are not. My local friends often tell me how many leaves of certain trees should be boiled to make a drink that will help with fever or infection or headache etc. I haven’t yet worked out why my friends are afraid of operations and even plaster casts, but they do love taking medicine.

Wealthier people may want to cover all bases so avail themselves of both traditional healing and going to the doctor, without telling the doctor. Reformist religious leaders and medical practitioners tend to speak out against traditional healing practices, but not always. I was at a clinic once when a hysterical teenage girl was brought in. In addition to the doctor looking at her, the nurses allowed the local witchdoctor to come and chant over her. ‘It won’t do any harm, and it might help’, they said. My friends listen politely to criticism of traditional practices, but then they tell me ‘we are not supposed to believe it but it is true anyway!’
I have occasionally taken on the medical system on behalf of a local friend, sometimes with a happy outcome. But not being medically trained, that is not the way forward for me usually. Something I learned many years ago is that God works according to the culture and the circumstances of a certain people-group. So, if a particular people-group do not have adequate medical facilities, He will do more miraculous healings!

I love telling the stories of Jesus’ healing and other miracles, reminding my friends that in the AlQu’ran Isa AlMasih is revealed as THE prophet with healing powers. If I am given an opportunity to pray for a local friend I talk about Isa AlMasih’s power to heal and deal with our felt needs before praying in His name. I stress that Isa has God’s power (Luke 11:20). Some have seen such prayers answered and this has fed into their ongoing search for Him for themselves.

In Indonesia, many of the Christian communities are also syncretic and living with animistic practices similar to those of their Muslim neighbours for similar reasons as the ones mentioned above. The parts of the Bible I first turn to with Christian friends seeking to be freed from the oppression of ancestor spirits, black magic, taboos and amulets are 1 Corinthians 8 and Ephesians. Andersen has fine material available both in English and Indonesian to help set Christians free.6 MBBs7 in Indonesia at least, almost always need to work through these issues in their discipleship. My default position is to assume that everyone I meet has been involved in black magic at some time and being set free from such powers will be part of their journey of faith.

Not all ritualistic practices are bad. We are just not just minds and spirits but also bodies. Our physical needs do require our and God’s attention. Coming into His presence involves our entire selves. God created us this way, so it should not come as a surprise that use of symbols and religious practices is normative worldwide. It is possible that we may use these in manipulative and syncretic ways, but that doesn’t mean that use of these things is always

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automatically wrong. All this to say that there is a spectrum of practices which at worst are bowing the knee to other powers, but at best help us to worship and pray. Visiting a shaman who uses Qur’anic verses, goes into a trance state where she is possessed by an ancestral spirit, reads chicken entrails and gives a charm to take home is not acceptable. However, it may be quite appropriate to visit a more mature believer to hear Bible verses read and to be prayed over. In such a visit candles and anointing oil might be used, and perhaps a bookmark with some encouraging words on it be given to take home. This is an area where we need wisdom, a willingness to experiment and a sense of humour, not legalism. Ruth Nicholls researched the religious practices of the Asian country where she worked and suggests ways that some of these prayer, recitation and chanting practices of Islam can be transformed and used by new followers of Isa AlMasih.8

The good news is that people from this folk Islam background often find and respond to Jesus when He appears to them in dreams and visions. Almost all of the MBBs I have spoken to have mentioned a dream of Isa or the Bible or a church which moved them forward on their road towards following Isa.

In pre-evangelism and discipling of new believers two issues crop up again and again. One is legalism - ‘what do I have to do to be saved, in terms of ablutions, spiritual disciplines, prayers, being ‘good’ etc?’ And the other is getting rid of magic practices, charms and influences. Nearly all of the MBBs I have met in Indonesia have had to be released from evil powers. And this is also the case for many who come to faith from a nominally Christian background.

And just when you thought it was safe, it is essential to seek God’s protection on ourselves as well as those He is working in. There are spiritual forces that are against working against us. I teach in a building that has a history of ghosts. At one point I found myself completely exhausted every day, but only when in this building. I asked a few friends to pray

8 Ruth Nicholls, “Folk Islamic Spirituality - a Help or Hindrance to a Seeker of Jesus Christ,” (Melbourne: Australian College of Theology, 2002). Unpublished paper prepared for DMin course work.
against whatever forces are in that place, and I pray Jesus' presence and protection on me when I enter that building, and that particular heaviness has not bothered me since.

In conclusion, folk Islam exists because there are physical and spiritual needs not being met by the prescribed practices of prayer, fasting and Quranic recitation. God in Christ can and wants to meet these needs, which is good news indeed!
References


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Orthodoxy or efficacy?

Muslim women negotiating the spirit world
Abstract

This article examines the beliefs and practices of Muslim women as they seek to negotiate the spirit world. It acknowledges the reality of this realm, and the tension women face between being orthodox while also needing practices that are efficacious in daily life. It examines the way in which women attempt to harness spiritual forces both to gain blessing or good fortune, and to ward off evil and misfortune. The final section presents some ideas for Western Christians to keep in mind as they engage with Muslim women in this area. The article draws on insights gathered by women who, as part of the Women’s I-View Course, are engaged in conversations with Muslim women around the world. Those insights are compared and contrasted with beliefs and practices found in Java, Indonesia, where Islam mixed with older animistic, Buddhist and Hindu practices, and where it continues to evolve and shape the ways in which Muslim women engage with the spiritual realm.
**Reality**

Muslim women throughout the world know that there is a spiritual realm. They live with the reality that whether spiritual forces are seen or not, they can be felt and are there.⁹ The Qur'an and the Hadith teach about the reality of the spiritual world.¹⁰ So how do women negotiate the spiritual world in their daily lives, and why?

Women bear great responsibilities in their societies, overseeing times of transition and vulnerability—pregnancy, birth, adolescence, marriage, death. “Women want to have control over their lives and the lives of their loved ones. They want to have some power over health and happiness.”¹¹ Despite this, women may feel they lack access to God and his power in their daily lives. Teaching that comes from the mosque is likely to primarily concern “truth” and “facts,” as opposed to methods of dealing with the problems of everyday life. Due to purity concerns, women are restricted in their religious observances each month through not being able to read the Qur'an or perform *sholat* prayers. Women, particularly in rural areas, may lack control over their lives. They may feel that they “have to make their own protection and be their own agency as there is no sense in Islam that God is with us.”¹²

Throughout the Islamic world women engage spiritual forces through a variety of practices, either to gain blessing or good fortune, or to ward off evil and misfortune. Popular Islamic beliefs and practices are not homogenous: those which are common in one country or region may be markedly less significant in another. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center, which interviewed more than 38,000 Muslims in 39 countries and territories in 2008–2009 and 2011–2012, showed that there are wide intercountry variations in the percentage of Muslims who believe in *jinn*, believe in sorcery, believe in the evil eye, use talismans for

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⁹ Dina, Central Asia. All names have been changed.

¹⁰ E.g. Al-Baqara 2:102; Al-An’aam 6:112; Al-Falaq 113:4; Sahih al-Bukhari 4: 144; Sahih al-Bukhari 54: 490; Sahih al-Bukhari 71: 663.

¹¹ Mary, working in Central Asia.

¹² Jane, working among diaspora Muslim women in Europe.
protection, use charms to ward off the evil eye, display Quranic verses in their homes, use traditional religious healers, and have seen exorcisms.\textsuperscript{13}

The differences highlighted in the Pew report, and seen in the varied conversations that women have had about this topic, demonstrate that it is not possible to generalise about a religion as distinct from its cultural context. In order to understand and engage with our Muslim sisters, we need to understand the practice of their beliefs. As Don Miller and Jan Branson clarify, “Religion is practised rather than thought; known rather than believed; efficacious or not rather than true or false ... religion is part of everyday experience.”\textsuperscript{14}

Nowhere is this more true than in Java, Indonesia, where traditional beliefs, religions, and practices have mixed with Islam, and where the practice of Islam is still changing with the gradual spread of Salafi/Wahhabi influence.\textsuperscript{15} This paper will bring together the voices of Muslim women from around the world but will also focus on the particular beliefs and practices found in Java, for it is when we look at concrete examples of popular Islam practised in particular locations that we are then alerted to the kinds of questions we can ask in other contexts.

**Tension**

“Backwards,” “unorthodox,” “old-fashioned,” “village/rural people do these things, not city/urban people,” “not in accordance with the teachings of Islam,” “sinful.” These are some of the responses Muslim women give when asked about beliefs and practices that relate to the spiritual world and to interactions with spiritual forces. Although some will acknowledge their involvement in spiritual practices, many women refuse to engage further with the topic.

Western women in a variety of countries across the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and


\textsuperscript{14} Donald Bruce Millar and Jan Branson, quoted in Bianca J. Smith, “\textit{Kejawen} Islam as gendered praxis in Javanese village religiosity,” in \textit{Indonesian Islam in a New Era: how women negotiate their Muslim identities}, edited by Susan Blackburn et al. (Clayton, Australia: Monash University Press, 2008), 102.

\textsuperscript{15} Andrew Beatty, \textit{A Shadow Falls in the Heart of Java} (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 8–9.
Southeast Asia, as well as those working among diaspora Muslims in the West, have all found it difficult to encourage their Muslim friends to open up and talk about practices relating to the supernatural.

This reluctance to discuss such matters may stem from a concern that Westerners will not understand, or may openly mock, them. Indonesian students of mine assumed that I, as an Australian, wouldn’t believe in spirits and ghosts. Dina said she knew there was a spirit in her house, but her Western husband could not see it, and was dismissive of the effects the spirit was having. Arabs may ignore Western medical advice if they think the root cause of their problem is spiritual, and they assume that the Western medical practitioner will not understand this. Ruth, a psychologist in Central Asia training local psychologists, had to convince them of her own belief in demon/spirit possession before they would talk about it with her.

More fundamentally, reticence can stem from a desire to be seen as practising “pure” or “orthodox” Islam. This is certainly the case in Java, Indonesia, where differences in the practice of Islam are often related to one’s cultural background, age, and Islamic group affiliation. Islam arrived in Java in approximately 1400 A.D. into a culture that was already thousands of years old, comprising of animist, Buddhist, and Hindu elements. Popular, often Sufi mystic, Islamic practices mixed into this culture and over time formed a syncretistic belief system that is known as kejawen. **Kejawen** culture was particularly strong in Yogyakarta, Central, and East Java, the centre of the influential Hindu Majapahit kingdom. Most **kejawen** practitioners identify formally as Muslims, and see no conflict between their Javanese beliefs and practices and their Islamic ones.

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16 Central Asia.

17 The six official religions in Indonesia are Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholic Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. All citizens are required to choose one of these religions to list on their identification cards (KTP). As of November 2017 the government has agreed to add a seventh category, “believers of the faith” (**kepercayaan**), which covers those who wish to identify as **kejawen**, as well as those who adhere to other native faiths. Krithika Varagur, “Indonesians Fight to Keep Mystical Religion of Java Alive,” *VOA News*, April 5, 2018. Accessed May 7, 2018, [https://www.voanews.com/a/indonesians-fight-to-keep-mystical-religion-of-java-alive/4333638.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/indonesians-fight-to-keep-mystical-religion-of-java-alive/4333638.html)
While the cultural and religious landscape of Indonesia is changing, and the sharp definitions of different groupings within Indonesian Islam that Clifford Geertz identified are fading, it is fair to say that a large number of Indonesian Muslims, even if they assert that they are “just Muslims,” have an affinity with either reformist or traditionalist Islam, and many identify with one of the two largest Muslim associations in the country, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). NU and its members are broadly within the traditionalist group, celebrating *kejawen* rituals such as the *slametan* (a ritual feast), visiting saints’ graves and shrines, engaging in chanting (*zikir*), and mystical prayers. In contrast, Muhammadiyah and its members are reformists/modernists, who promote Islam as a logical, rational religion, and who wish to eliminate superstition, Hindu practices, and traditions that are contrary to Islam. Firda, a Javanese Muslim, asserted that she does not engage in any practices outside of prayer and reading the Qur’an, because she “grew up within the culture of Muhammadiyah, an Islamic organisation whose … mission is to purify the Islamic teaching from practices considered as *syirik*. *Syirik* is believing in not only God as the source of power.” Firda’s comments are echoed in a fatwa released by Muhammadiyah, which forbids the use of amulets, as they rely on sources other than God.

Two further factors to consider when discussing supernatural beliefs and practices with women are that of age and context. Only six university-aged Indonesian students wanted to engage with me on the topic of supernatural beliefs and practices—and of those, only three

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19 Muhammadiyah has around 20 million followers, while NU has around 30 million. van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam*, 2, 59. It is important to note that while the modernist-traditionalist dichotomy is still useful, Indonesian Islam and its organisations have been in flux over the past decades. New organisations have emerged, and the modernist-traditionalist distinctions between NU and Muhammadiyah have blurred. See Martin van Bruinessen, “Overview of Muslim Organizations, Associations and Movements in Indonesia,” in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: explaining the “conservative turn,”* ed. Martin van Bruinessen (Singapore: ISEAS, 2013), 21–59.
were willing to discuss any practices that did not involve prayer or recitation of the Qur’an or Hadith alone. Furthermore, one of those students, Mirna, was at pains to distance herself from such practices, pointing out that she is a Muslim activist and a teacher of the Qur’an. My students’ reticence is almost certainly related to the fact that younger generations of Indonesians have become increasingly pious and observant in their practice of Islam. Andrew Beatty observed this change, noting that in the East Javanese village where he did his ethnographic research, young people were turning away from “the diversity of [their] parents’ and grandparents’ generations” and embracing “a certain vision—puritan, rule-bound, conformist—of the Islamic way” that is now promoted in Indonesian schools, on television, and in law.

With regard to context, it may be that urban people feel they have more control over their lives, and thus feel less need to turn to these practices. Sue got the impression that “folkish” activities were “only done by people outside the city.” Mirna commented that “Islam kejawen are mainly in rural areas.” Rifki stated that “I and my family don’t practice those traditions [kejawen rituals] anymore because my family lives in a city where the people are more moderate so we practice the good deeds that are stated in Qur'an and hadiths only. So we practise Islam without mixing it with the culture although we’re not extremists.” Hanifa said that for her mother, relatives, and mother’s neighbours in South Asia, folk Islamic practices are “a way of life.” Hanifa grew up knowing of power places, objects, persons, times,

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24 van Doorn-Harder, Women Shaping Islam, 52. One example of this is the phenomenon of increasing numbers of young women wearing the jilbab (hijab), a trend which has now spread to include their mothers and older women. See Louise Jefferies, “The Rise of the Jilbabasi in Indonesia: implications for Christian witness,” Missiology: an International Review 39, no. 2 (2011).
25 Muslim children in Java, even those in villages, regularly now attend Qur’anic reading/recitation classes after school. Both state universities and private Muslim universities also hold compulsory Qur’anic reading/recitation classes.
26 Beatty, A Shadow Falls, 228. This “Islamic way” has been greatly influenced by a consistent effort by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia to “purify Indonesian Muslim’s beliefs and practices, harmonizing them with an idealized orthodoxy.” van Bruinessen, Contemporary Developments, 6. The Majelis Ulama Indonesia was established by the Soeharto government, and as such is a “semi-official religious authority”. After Soeharto’s New Order regime ended in 1998, the MUI has actively promoted the purification of Islam in all areas of Indonesian life and thought. Moch Nur Ichwan, “Towards a Puritanical Moderate Islam: The Majelis Ulama Indonesia and the Politics of Religious Orthodoxy,” in van Bruinessen, Contemporary Developments, 60–61.
27 Middle East.
28 Indonesia.
and rituals, but she feels like it’s something uneducated, rural people do. Educated Muslims, many of whom live in urban contexts, have more access to power that comes from “official” Islamic sources—they may attend a mosque or community building more regularly than less educated women for lectures, prayer sessions, and to memorise, read, or recite the Qur’an. As such, they may feel less need to access supernatural powers from other sources. Van Bruinessen comments that kejawen and traditionalist Muslim beliefs and rituals are focused on local shrines and local spirits, whose powers are geographically circumscribed. As has been observed elsewhere, once people break out of their geographical isolation and by trade and travel start interacting more intensively with more distant communities, the old local spirits are of little help to them and supernatural support of a more universal scope has a strong appeal.

The need for solutions

Despite the reluctance of many Muslim women to discuss supernatural beliefs and practices, most of them acknowledge their existence, and many admit to engaging in them. The reasons women want to harness supernatural forces for good or ill stem from their need for solutions to life’s everyday problems and to those things which seem out of their control. This desire for control can outweigh a woman’s need to be seen as “orthodox.” Elina said that while she believes it is a sin to dabble in such practices she has seen the efficacy of them, and that “what drives people to these practices is their need for a solution to their problems. The mullahs at the mosque only teach you the Quran.” Mina reported that women in her country cannot “conceive of a worldview where people don’t think about good/evil/neutral spirits on a daily

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31 Central Asia.
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basis. Women are controlled even more by fear of death and spirits than they are by a desire to be honourable.”

Claudia found that South Asian diaspora women are highly pragmatic in their approach—“It works, my uncle was healed, so why would God think it was bad?” She further commented that “it always seemed that if an occult practice worked it was sanctioned by God, and if it failed it was of Satan or the victim had some sort of sin sticking to him.” Clearly, the line between what is considered a “legitimate” source of power and what is seen as not “legitimate” is drawn differently by different Muslims. As Eleanor Doumato discusses, for Wahhabis and their interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith, prayer, following the correct procedure, is the right and only way to engage with the spirit world—through invoking help directly from God, “the ultimate spirit.” Contrasting, for “Sunnis of the Gulf, and for Shi’ites, the line between prayer and magic was elastic.” While this observation was made based on practices in the early 1900s, the concept of legitimacy remains one that is highly relevant to explore with Muslim women.

In Java the overriding need for harmony within a community compels rural women to engage in kejawen rituals that interact with the spirits. “Interactions with [the world of village guardian spirits and ancestors] ... are seen as essential to the ongoing religiosity of the village: that is, women desire village harmony, and communication with spirits is vital to ensure this.”

Furthermore, the Javanese emphasis on the preservation of harmony leads women from both orthodox and kejawen backgrounds to work together in kejawen rituals, despite having different theological views about them. The converse can also be true: Beatty observed that villagers who were somewhat “nominal” in their observance of Islam joined the more orthodox in preparing for and celebrating Islamic feast days because they “wanted to belong to a village where differences could be harmonized.” Van Doorn-Harder also contends that the Javanese worldview centres on “a belief in the unity of being that must remain in a state of harmony.

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32 Central Asia.
36 Beatty, A Shadow Falls, 227.
Unseen powers that affect the human condition are part of this universe." She states that while for reformists this belief “is not harmless syncretism,” they too are “keen on preserving harmony” and so have “transformed this Javanese concept into one of their most cherished characteristics: ikhlas, or total dedication to God’s will.”

History, culture, context, and individual circumstances all play a role in how women view, and to what extent they engage in, practices that seek to influence spiritual forces. What is more, there is variation in the actual practices undertaken. These practices can be grouped as those which seek to attract blessing and good fortune, and those which aim to ward off evil and misfortune, or to undo evil/misfortune that has already been suffered.

**Seeking blessing**

The concept of blessing (baraka) is used frequently in the Qur’an. Blessings come from God, and are a gift from Him to those who obey Him and submit to His will. Blessings can come “in the form of knowledge, wisdom, qualities, skills, wealth, health, or family.”

One of the key ways in which blessings are obtained is through visiting holy places, such as shrines or cemeteries of saints/holy people. The Pew Forum report found that a majority of Muslims across Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, as well as in Lebanon, Iraq, and Russia, “endorse visiting shrines of Muslim saints as a legitimate form of worship.”

Pilgrims visit shrines to access the mediatorial powers of the saint or prophet who is buried there. The shrines of the wali songo, nine saints who are credited with bringing Islam to Java, are frequented by Muslim pilgrims, some of whom ask the saints to pray to God on their behalf,

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58 E.g. Al-Araaf 7:96; Al-Ahzaab 33:43.
in the hopes that, since the saints are closer to God, their prayers will be answered.\textsuperscript{41} There are also two particularly auspicious mountains in Java where many people go to perform rituals to gain wealth.\textsuperscript{42} Even political candidates in Java are not above performing rituals in sacred places, following procedures prescribed by dukun.\textsuperscript{43} They do this in order to absorb the power that resides in such places, so that they too will be powerful and will increase their chances of being elected.\textsuperscript{44}

Dina said that in her Central Asian nation “most people visit graves of saints to get blessings, get healed etc. We have a lot of places where many people do pilgrimages there. Cemeteries and holy places have pure water to wash them from sicknesses, bring healing. Most places have trees around those graves which they call "wish trees". They tie some clothes or piece of material on the branches and secretly tell their wishes so it will come true.”

Cora observed that in South Asia the three biggest reasons women visit shrines and “make deals with "angels" for blessings” were fertility issues, finance issues, and chronic health issues. Anne reported that in the Middle East festivals are seen as times when both “Christians and Muslims experience power and blessing that comes from a Christian or Muslim saint", and she noted that because different saints specialise in specific things, different tombs have power for different things.


Other ways of gaining blessing include giving money or clothing to others—“So I give my old clothes away and my cupboard gets filled with even more clothes!”⁴⁵—or shaving a newborn baby’s hair and giving the same weight in gold to the poor to ensure the baby has good health all their life.⁴⁶ In North Africa pregnant women “look at someone with features they want for their baby then the baby will get those features,” and in Southeast Asia pregnant women will ask their friends’ daughters to touch their belly so that they too will have a daughter. South Asians visit pirs (Sufi holy men), who write down Qur’anic verses in “special ink” which is then dissolved in water or milk and drunk (this method can also be used to deliver curses). In Indonesia uncooked rice or salt is sprinkled on the floors of new businesses to bring good fortune.

Charms or talismans can also be used to gain blessings or good fortune. Some Indonesians get magical charms, in the form of needles (susuk) that have been blessed by a dukun, implanted under their skin. These charms are believed to bring about good fortune in love, work, and business dealings.⁴⁷ Even the Qur’an can be used as a protective charm—it is placed in cars and on the top of a cupboard in the house for this reason.⁴⁸ While not “charms” in themselves, the reading/recitation of the Qur’an, the strict observation of the five pillars of Islam, prayer in its various forms, and leading a life of worship and service to God often appear to be used as a way of harnessing the positive force of blessing.⁴⁹

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⁴⁵ Maha, Middle East.
⁴⁶ Sarah, Middle East.
⁴⁸ Middle East, South Asia.
⁴⁹ A number of Indonesians cited one or other of these methods as a way of gaining blessing, and the observation has also been made regarding Muslims in South Asia.
Warding off evil

As well as being used to gain blessing, amulets and charms are frequently used to ward off evil. In Central Asia one type of charm can be attached to the body,

*usually tied around the upper arm but can be worn on a necklace or pinned to the inside of a shirt... [This is often] prescribed for fear. ... People believe that getting scared can lead to physical illness or sometimes even to tragedies (death of a relative), so these [charms] are supposed to be able to avert the illness/disaster. They are sometimes prescribed along with a special diet that should be followed for 2 weeks.*

Inas said she has an object shaped like an egg with the words from the Quran around it at the entrance of her apartment to keep the evil out. Diaspora Muslims in Europe hang pieces of black ribbon from rearview mirrors or exhaust pipes, place chappati made from a special flour of ground seeds on roofs, and hang chilli peppers around doorframes to ward off evil spirits. A candle can be placed in every corner of a room to take away evil in East Africa. Incense is used across the Muslim world to cleanse a place of evil. Salt is sprinkled at the site of new constructions in North Africa.

Objects can also transmit curses if they have had spells put on them by a traditional religious healer. Fatimah said that someone placed a dead animal in front of her door to put a curse on her. While Fatimah said she didn't believe in curses, her Western friend got the impression that maybe she believes that something bad will happen. Dina described a variety of different things that can be used to bring curses on someone, for example “hair, pins, needles, dust ...”. Fari related the story of a woman in the Middle East whose “father’s second wife put curses on her by making a doll out of her hair and stolen clothes and poking it with pins in the back and chest. She talked about how for months she was debilitated with

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50 South Asia.
51 North Africa.
52 Central Asia.

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terrible pain in the chest and back which doctors couldn’t treat until the doll was discovered and destroyed and the pain went away.”

Traditional Javanese daggers (keris/kris) are widely believed to be a source of power. Van Doorn-Harder relates the story of a well-known, and devout, Muslim activist in Yogyakarta who inherited a keris from her father. When it was stored carelessly in the attic of an orphanage, several children fell ill and some died. A dukun traced the source of the problem to the keris, whereupon the activist performed the required rituals and the sick children were healed. Indonesia’s former president Suharto also held a large collection of keris, as well as ancient Javanese manuscripts, “that many believed were the source of his power.”

**The evil eye**

The concept of envy is, for many Muslim people around the world, associated with the evil eye, a curse which has the power to cause harm or misfortune. The evil eye is linked to the concept of ‘limited good’—that there is only so much good in the world, so if someone has something good it means that someone else misses out and will be worse off. Belief in the evil eye and its effects is common in a majority of countries the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia.

Women employ a variety of means to ward off the evil eye, with one of the most common being the use of amulets, in the form of blue beads or stones, which are worn, carried, or displayed in houses. Dina, from Central Asia, said that such amulets are “glass, dark blue with black dot on [them].” These amulets are said to deflect the curse—“the evil eye looking at you is met with the blue ‘eye’ looking back.” Another often used symbol is that of a hand with

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53 While they are most strongly associated with Javanese culture, keris are not confined to Java or Indonesia; they are also indigenous to Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei, Singapore and the Philippines. See Wikipedia, “Kris,” Accessed June 6, 2018. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kris](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kris)


55 Allard, “World of black magic.”

56 Muhammad himself acknowledged the evil eye as real. Sahih al-Bukhari 71:634–636.


58 Noor, Middle East.
the palm facing outwards. The phrase *masha’Allah* (*mashallah*, “God has willed it”), which invokes God’s blessing, is frequently employed for protection after a compliment is given. In Central Asia people who are particularly beautiful are spat upon to protect them. Safina, a South Asian Muslim residing in Europe, reported that she doesn’t tell anyone of her plans or of the good things happening to her/her children because she’s afraid of jealousy, curses, and someone lying about her.

Since babies are particularly susceptible, a large number of protective measures are taken to prevent them being affected. These include making the baby appear unattractive by painting kohl or black eye liner around the eyes, by placing a black dot on the forehead or side of the head, tying red threads around the baby’s wrist, pinning an amulet containing blessed Qur’anic verses on to the baby’s clothes as soon as it is born, and tying a small black Qur’an verse bag around the baby or toddler’s neck. Petra’s sister-in-law forbids other members of the family from telling people about her children, “for example the Western habit of sharing their birthweight/mentioning how much they’ve grown/milestones reached, etc,” in order to protect them. While jealousy is a key element of the evil eye, many of Petra’s friends pointed out that “it can be done "accidentally" without envy or bad intention—even a loving mother who praises her child and forgets to say "mashallah" can cause it to be cursed, accidentally.”

In South Asia chillies are burned in the house in case of unconscious release of the evil eye when visitors come to congratulate the family on the baby’s birth.

The effects of envy can be significant:

> Multiple university educated friends of mine have strongly expressed the evil eye was the cause of them getting ill. There was NO other reason for the illness (not a virus!). For

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59 South Asia, North Africa, Middle East.
60 South Asia and Middle East.
61 Central Asia.
62 Middle East.
63 Middle East and South Asia.
64 Middle East.
example, my teacher was looking very beautiful at a wedding, forgot to get her mum to say words of the Qur'an over her, and then she was in bed with flu-like symptoms for 4 days without any other cause: it was definitely jealousy of the other women at the wedding. Another example is that my friend purchased a new house, and when everyone found out about it, she got a flu.65

“Friends refused to sell their car when people came wanting to buy it and then it was in an accident the next time they went out in it. They saw that as very much deliberate.”66

Antidotes to curses include burning particular herbs, getting some seeds mixed with honey from the local pir, destroying the cursed object, and speaking the Qur'an over oneself or the affected person.

Despite its prominence in a majority of countries, not all Muslim cultures link envy strongly to the evil eye and its negative effects. I was unaware of the evil eye when I was in Indonesia, and saw none of the ubiquitous blue beads that are associated with it in other places. The Pew Forum report correlates this observation, showing that only 29% of Indonesians have a belief in the evil eye.

When I asked my university students about the concept of envy and its power to make people sick, only two responded. Rifki said “I have actually heard of penyakit 'ain [sickness caused by envy]. I think the term is also new in Indonesia, but it's quite trending since you know most Indonesians are Muslims. There are some posts on Facebook, Instagram, or articles about penyakit 'ain. So I think people already believe in that.” It is possible that the evil eye is a concept that is trending because it is being brought back by the many Indonesian graduates of universities in countries where it is prevalent, such as Turkey and Egypt. It could also be carried in to Indonesia by Indian or Turkish Muslims who come as missionaries to the country.

65 Janet, Middle East.
66 Cathy, South Asia.
Rifki explained that the Facebook posts/articles “usually contain some suggestions for people not to post or brag actually about their life because it might cause other people to be jealous and it will impact their health. The most important suggestion I guess is not to post a picture that shows the face especially when the purpose is to show how beautiful someone is.” Latfi commented that

>from what I know, when someone envies a person, the person who gets envied sometimes will get sick. ‘Ain [envy] happens when we see something beautiful (a good-looking baby or beautiful woman, etc) and then we talk about the good things of the person, he or she will get something bad. I learnt that to protect someone from ‘ain, we have to praise God when we see something beautiful. If someone gets sick because of ‘ain, it is suggested to use the wudu (ablution) water (the water that is used to clean some body parts before praying) of the person who envies to heal the one who gets envied.

**Possession**

The fear of evil spirits is widespread in the Muslim world, and stories abound of people being possessed by them—either through deliberate witchcraft or because the person is susceptible to their influence. A group of Indonesian women said that “some people are more vulnerable to being disturbed by spirits, especially if they go to ‘sinister’ places, and if you daydream you are definitely more vulnerable.” One of my Indonesian students was possessed while in class at university. My Javanese house helper came to work one day visibly upset, telling me that her son had gone to watch (against her wishes) a local Javanese dance (*kuda lumping*) in which the dancer enters a trance, becomes spirit-possessed, and performs abnormal feats, such as eating glass. While watching the performance, her son was himself possessed. Dina’s BMB friend experienced possession as a result of engaging in adultery. She commented that “sex is an opening for an evil spirit to come and live in you.” In order to avoid possession, women avoid going out in the dark, or to places which are known to be frequented by spirits—my female students would never go alone to the bathroom in the English classroom block.
It is not just individuals who can be affected. Stories in the Indonesian media about mass possessions are commonplace, with a quick search on just one news website bringing up four pages-worth, spanning the years 2012–2018. Factory workers and school students appear to be the most often affected. According to one Indonesian Islamic religious teacher, the majority of those who are possessed are females, due to “aspects of their psyche/spirituality being weaker” than that of males.

Exorcism in Islam is called ruqyah. How the ruqyah is performed appears to differ from place to place. When Sa’id became a Christian, his Middle Eastern family believed him to be possessed. They took him to a mosque where an imam who specialised in exorcisms shouted in his ears, hit him on the back (“to make the spirit uncomfortable to make him leave”), and then recited the Qur’an and spat at water, which Sa’id then drank. Mirna made clear that in Indonesia there is a distinction between ruqyah syar’iyyah, which is performed by an Islamic leader (ustadz or kyai) and is based on the Qur’an and Hadith, and ruqyah syirkiyyah, which is performed by a dukun and asks for deliverance from jinn/Shaitan. For ruqyah syar’iyyah an ustadz will read some verses of the Qur’an and pray to Allah for the person. This can be done in a house or a mosque, but is more effective in a mosque. Rifki explained that the ustadz

will read some lines from the Qur’an that will cause the evil spirit to feel burned, and then they will communicate with the evil spirit through the person and ask the evil spirit to leave the person’s body. If the evil spirit refuses to leave, the ustadz will read some more lines that will torture the evil spirit and force them to get out. The person usually will puke as the sign that the evil spirit is already out of their body.

According to Rifki, kejawen Muslims ask an orang pintar for help, as

they believe that person can move the jinn from their houses to a tree, river, or somewhere else where the jinn won’t disturb them anymore. The orang pintar will usually try to communicate with the jinn and make a bargain with the jinn.” The jinn will agree to move in
return for something—“for example the owner of the house should provide sesajen [ritual offerings to spirits] or food for the jinn that usually consist of coffee, sticky rice, and chicken.

**Where to from here?**

Although the Bible teaches about the reality of the spirit world and has many examples of interaction with it, Western Christians remain unsure of how to engage with Muslim women in this area. Understanding the differences between a Christian covenantal relationship with God and a Muslim relationship with God may help us to approach this issue.

Unlike Muslim women, we are in a covenantal relationship with God. We “have forgotten what it’s like to live in fear—of powers, of judgement, of not being loved,” because we have “absolute certainty that the power we have is God’s power and so there is no power that is stronger. … [We also] know that God works to bring us good and not harm, [so] we are not afraid of God’s power. … [Another] big difference is that we have access to that power all the time. We know that God is with us each minute of each day. … God is good, reliable, and consistent.” We are convinced, and can share with our friends this conviction, that “that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38–39).

In contrast, many Muslim women, despite their efforts (be they “orthodox” or less so), fail to achieve freedom from their fear of evil spirits, and fail to gain the assurance and control they seek. Biblical stories which show God’s power may not necessarily have the impact we desire because while Islam affirms God’s omnipotence, God is not bound to Muslims in covenant relationship, and therefore his reliability, goodness, and consistency, are not certain.

This lack of assurance in how God will respond means that many of the practices Muslims engage in demonstrate a desire to control and manipulate spiritual forces, including God, to ensure they have access to blessing and protection from evil. Christians, on the other hand, don’t need to manipulate God. Instead, we live in covenantal obedience to Him, accepting that He is in control and not trying to operate behind His back.
Stories that demonstrate how generous God is challenge the view that there is only limited good in the world and that not all will be beneficiaries of that good. Instead, if generous good is waiting to flow to all, even those who appear ‘undeserving’ or who are unable to gain merit themselves, then the need to manipulate is removed. Examples of stories that could be used include the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16); the Syrophoenician woman (Matthew 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–29); the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42); the ten lepers who were all healed bodily, even though only one returned (Luke 17:11–19); and the two accounts of abundant leftovers that are gathered after Jesus feeds vast crowds (Matthew 14:13–21; Matthew 15:29–39).

We ourselves need to mirror God’s generosity in the way we relate to our friends. In many cultures, Indonesia included, a person does not receive gifts on their birthday but rather gives gifts to others. For example, if someone gives birth to a child, they celebrate that blessing and goodness by taking small gifts to their neighbours, colleagues, friends, and relatives. For an important birthday or anniversary, adults will take their colleagues and friends out to a restaurant for a party. When we are aware that someone is struggling financially, we can be generous without expectation of return. While such generosity may be viewed by Muslim neighbours and friends as ‘merit-making’ rather than a sharing of God’s generosity, we can dispel this view sometimes by occasionally sharing that the reason we are giving—a simple statement such as “I am giving this to you because God loves you” may open up a conversation about God’s love and generosity.

Praying in Jesus’ name with women is a vital part of our relationships with Muslim women. From most people’s experiences, women have not refused prayer when it is offered. Prayer demonstrates that we are looking to God as the source of protection, blessing, and power. Many women in the I-View Course spoke about the opportunities they have had to speak words of blessing or pray over new babies, using passages such as Numbers 6:24–26. Dina, in Central Asia, prays into the ears of babies, asking that God would open their ears to hear God’s word and bring the family to him. Sometimes, however, people do not hear this link to God’s power alone. Melina related a time when she prayed for a women’s knee. She was then identified as a person of power that everyone should go to for prayer, and although she tried...
to point people back to God as the source of power, they did not hear it. She found it encouraging to be reminded that there are examples of people who do not necessarily immediately follow Jesus despite receiving his healing power—thus “their response is not our responsibility.” We may also need to deal with situations in which God responds to prayer with a “no.” Claudia said South Asian diaspora Muslims “have a hard time accepting a no from God and this can lead to more occult practices.” Her friends were challenged, however, when they saw how she and her husband accepted no from God. Developing deep relationships with women and sharing our lives and faith with them openly is key to helping them see what our relationship with God is like and how different it is from one in which we are trying to manipulate God or spiritual forces for our own agendas.

In conclusion, we need to acknowledge the reality of the spirit world. We must ensure that we ourselves are trusting in God as the ultimate source of power. Since we are dealing with a powerful reality, prayer must undergird everything we do. We should ask other Christians to pray for us and with us. We need to examine our own responses to crises—what is the first thing we do? We can ask God to help us see and understand the world as our Muslim friends see it, and ask Him to help us to connect with them in ways that are meaningful for them.

To God be the glory!
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Muslim women, the supernatural, the occult and power encounter
Introduction: revealed religion and folk religion

Miracle and the supernatural are part of the cosmologies of both Christianity and Islam. The greatest miracle in Islam is the Qur'an. In Christianity, the greatest miracle is the resurrection of the incarnate, living word, the Lord Jesus Christ. At some points, the religions which claim to be revealed degenerate into folk religion. The serpent of brass, made by Moses at God’s command in the wilderness (Numbers 21:4-9) later became an object of worship, which had to be destroyed during King Hezekiah’s reformation. (2 Kings 18:4). Jeremiah was ordered to condemn the mechanical reliance of the people on the presence of the Temple of God in Jerusalem. They regarded the Temple as a kind of automatic insurance policy guaranteeing their protection and that of the city. (Jeremiah 7:4). In Judaism, Christianity and Islam practices sometimes show deviations from the ideal as set out in their respective scriptures. There are magical uses of the names of God. Bibliolatry or the worship of the book and bibliomancy or the magical use of the book replace the proper reading of the inspired books. Charms and excessive veneration of saints replace reliance on God.

Both men and women, the illiterate and the educated are involved. Benazir Bhutto in her autobiography Daughter of the East relates that before leaving Karachi in 1969:

I stood in the carved wooden doorway...while my mother passed my new Holy Qur'an over my head. I kissed it. And together we left for the airport to fly to the United States.”[1]
Before her father's execution he had urged her:

‘Go to pray at Lal Shahbaz Qalander...I never got there last Eid’. Lal Shahbaz Qalander. One of our most famous saints. My grandmother had gone to pray at his shrine when my father became very ill as a baby and nearly died. Would God be able to hear a daughter’s prayer for the same person?[2]

The Qur’an condemns witchcraft. (surah 113:4). However, it makes no categorical condemnation of the occult such as is found in Deuteronomy 18:10-12. The Qur’an even hosts some of the animist practices prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia, e.g. surah 56:75 where there is a reference to astrology. The adoration of the sun and moon is forbidden in the Qur’an. (Q 41:37).

**Miracles at shrines**

I once went with a group of students to the shrine of Sufi Qamar Ali Darvesh at Shivapur, a village near Pune in India. We watched the phenomenon of the levitating rocks. Two large round boulders lay close to each other. We saw the larger weighing about seventy kilograms raised through the power of the saint to a height of nearly two metres. Eleven men using only an index finger each called in unison on the name of the saint and so raised the boulder for several minutes. Muslims, Hindus and Christians come in their hundreds each day to the shrine partly because of this miracle and partly to find healing through using the water of the nearby spring and by praying to the saint. In my estimation such miracles and such healings do not come from God. Here I would endorse what John White says in a recent book:
"Demonic power is nothing more than divine power corrupted. Water that is dangerously polluted does not cease to be water and may still look like, and even sometimes taste like pure water. So devilish miracles will deceive 'even the very elect'.\[3\]

Satan will appear 'as an angel of light'. Hell's power will, however, be progressively enslaving and end in death and destruction, while God's power will be redemptive, vivifying, cleansing, freeing and restorative." (2 Corinthians 11:14). Many people have problems grasping that what is or appears miraculous may have a source other than God.

**Relics**

In such a centre of orthodoxy as the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore, Pakistan, I have visited the exhibition of twenty-seven relics which attracts both Sunnis and Shias. One can see displayed behind glass Muhammad's walking stick, three of his sandals, his underwear, his banner with magic squares on it, Fatima's handkerchief and prayermat, and dust from the battle-field at Karbala. Some of the viewers get as near as possible to the relics by rubbing the glass with their hands and then rubbing their faces to transfer the blessing from the relic to themselves. Others especially the Shias are moved to tears as they see the dust from Karbala where Ali's son Hussain was martyred.

**Exorcism**

In Muscat, the capital of the Sultanate of Oman, I have heard Muslim exorcists at work for hours in the evening and earlier part of the night casting out evil spirits. To listen to the chanting of the exorcists and the shrieks of the afflicted is an eerie and chilling experience. The crucial matter in Christian exorcism is diagnosis. Without being sure that exorcism is needed it is unwise to proceed.

Generally, it is wise to work with two or three others in a team. In my contribution to *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road*[4] I have dealt with the subject in some detail. However, here is another case study that occurred after I wrote that chapter. I was visiting a
small Christian hospital in the Middle East. The Arab Medical Director of the hospital had invited me for a few days to give some Christian teaching. When I arrived he also requested me to help by joining the small team involved with a demonized nominal Christian woman. The team comprised of the husband who was a committed believer, a psychiatrist and the Medical Superintendent. We met the woman that evening in the church. I asked to be allowed to interview her through a translator and make my own diagnosis. It soon became apparent that she was not yet 'born of the spirit'. I tried unsuccessfully to help her see her need of Christ and his saving power.

After a while, I told the translator that I would pray for her but in English so there was no need for him to translate. She knew no English. I prayed aloud for about ten minutes but when in my prayer I quoted Isaiah's word about the cross of Christ "by his stripes we are healed", the woman who had been quiet and normal until this point lost all self-control and behaved in a demented manner. Her husband and the doctor carried her from the pew to the chancel and it took three people to hold her down. I was convinced that their diagnosis was correct and that she was demonized. The demons, and there were several, could not stand the mention of the blood of Christ. I then tried to find out how and when they had entered her. Apparently, her parents had taken her on one occasion to a Muslim shrine for some specific spiritual purpose. Her trouble seemed to have dated from then. We struggled with her and the evil powers for three hours each evening. She was not delivered during my visit but some months later I heard of her deliverance and of her new life in Christ. Praise be to God.

The cleansing of buildings

I have stayed in quite a number of buildings that Muslims claimed were inhabited by evil spirits. Our experiences confirmed these claims. Muslims sometimes refuse to rent buildings for their own use, which they perceive to be the dwelling place of evil powers. Spirits generally inhabit a particular part of a building. The cleansing of a building by the power of Christ can be a convincing testimony to Muslims. It should also be noted that Christians have sometimes undermined their own ministries by not cleansing a building before dedicating and living in it. "The Christian's home or 'tent' must ever be holy ground, even although all around
be evil, for the Embassy is privileged land and here the Ambassador enjoys extra-territorial rights".[5] We never know what has occurred on the land on which a house is built, nor in what ways the builders have appeased evil spirits as they built. Maybe they made an animal sacrifice before laying the foundations. Sometimes previous owners or tenants have practised magic or some occult activity. I was involved in the cleansing of a house in which a fortune-teller had lived for some years. There were weird markings in paint in unexpected places and a feeling of oppression in certain areas of the house. It is interesting that the next tenant who was a Christian who knew nothing about the history of the house and the service of cleansing remarked how the house seemed so full of peace and the presence of the Lord.

Sometimes a place is influenced adversely by the environment or those who visit. A quiet service of cleaning including casting out, praise and prayer might be needed. Recently, one of my friends wrote:

"The house-warming we discussed took place two days ago. Alan, our Rector, prayed so beautifully, thinking first about houses Jesus was invited into in the New Testament. Then he went on to think about not only my house, but all the houses in the Avenue. There were fourteen of us, just enough to sit comfortably... Although not many of my neighbours were there, I have a lot of openings into houses as a result."

**Black magic**

In a Punjabi village in Pakistan my two companions and I experienced the full force of black magic practitioners. I have described this in my book Christ Supreme over Satan. Each evening after a day of ministry in other villages, we returned to the one-roomed house which was our base for ten days. We ran an evening service for the Christian community about twenty of whom came and sat in the courtyard. Beyond the courtyard in the village square hidden by the darkness up to two hundred Muslims used to listen in - a silent, voluntary, hidden congregation. This probably enraged the practitioners of black magic. Sudden illness, nightmares, shapes in the darkness, a scorpion at the head of the bed, strange knockings and
peculiar bloodstains with unnatural patterns - all this and more. God demonstrated his power by instant healing, keeping one of the three of us always watching and praising God, a wall of light marking a compound across the square where devil worship was practised and the banishing of fear as we all prayed together. (Zechariah 2:5). The exercise of our Christ-given authority of binding the power of Satan sometimes frees the way for the proclamation of the gospel and the practitioners of black magic can be rendered ineffective. (Matthew 18:18; Mark 3:27).

**Illness, healing and prayer**

Sometimes illness is directly satanic in origin as it was in the case of Peter’s mother-in-law when Jesus rebuked the fever and she was immediately healed. (Luke 4:38-39). Jesus has given us authority to deal with illness of satanic origin in a similar way in his name. The satanic element in illness can be eliminated the most easily.

Strangely, we often consider it as the last option. Often the reasons for illness are complex. Sometimes healing comes through prayer and treatment. In this too Jesus gives us an example. (Mark 8:23-25). Healings often give further opportunities for sharing the gospel with the patient and the family. Sick Muslims are often grateful for the prayers of their Christian friends. If the patient is not healed it is no dishonour to the name of Jesus and if he or she is healed the Muslim is generally open to learning more about Jesus.

**Visions and dreams of Christ**

There are many accounts of Muslims having had visions or dreams of Christ. Seppo Syrianen in his limited survey in Pakistan discovered that the hearing or reading of scripture, the love of Christ seen in a person and visions or dreams of Christ were the three main influences in bringing Muslims to Christ. Over half of those he interviewed had such visions or dreams. We can pray for Muslims to have visions or dreams of Jesus the Son of God. One veteran missionary to Pakistan wrote in a letter dated March 2, 1994: "The 27th night of the month of Ramadan or Ramzan is very special to Muslims. They ask God for special revelations that night. He sometimes appears to some of them telling them about Jesus, the Lamb of God." At least
35% of all recent Turkish conversions were probably in response to dreams and visions of Jesus as the Son of God. In many other Middle Eastern countries people have had dreams in which they are instructed to search for and read the Christian scriptures. It has been noted that when they have found the written Word (often in remarkable ways) the dreams and visions cease. If someone came to you and said that he or she had had a vision of Christ, what would you say? The main point is not to try and establish whether the experience is from God or some other source but to point that person to the Jesus of the Bible. The real Jesus is to be found in the scripture.

**Charms or amulets**

Charms generally contain the names of God, or verses from the Qur'an or their numerical equivalent. Charms can also be eaten or drunk and sometimes increase the person's bondage to Satan. Even Christians can be enslaved unwittingly. I sometimes ask someone wearing a charm round the neck what is in it and on hearing that it is a verse I ask whether the wearer thinks that God prefers his word around our necks or in our hearts. The answer is always in our hearts. I then offer to teach a word of God to put in the heart e.g. Romans 5:8. I have never met a Muslim woman to whom I quoted this verse who was worried about its theology even after I had explained it carefully.

**Curses and the evil eye**

Several of my committed Christian friends have been severely affected by curses generally in the form of illness and depression for months or even years until they or someone else has detected and broken it by Christ's power. Many Muslims are afraid of the evil eye. We can share how God helps us to deal with fear and how he guides us with his eye. (Psalm 32:8).

**Conclusion**

After over forty years of living, working and travelling in the Muslim world I have concluded that Quranic Islam and folk Islam are inextricably linked especially in that the Qur'an seems to
host animism. Unquestionably there is evidence of Satanic activity in folk Islam. There is a need to pray for the breaking of the bonds and the release of the captives among the people of the mosque and the shrine. In ministering to Muslims we are involved in areas of spiritual warfare against Satan who certainly manifests his power in counterfeit miracles, the supernatural and the occult. But Satan's use of the supernatural is only part of his strategy. The New Testament gives more emphasis to Satan's attack through human frailty than to his use of the supernatural. (Galatians 5:19-21). All Christians are, therefore, involved in spiritual warfare as it is not a warfare which focuses only on the supernatural manifestations of evil. However, we especially need to seek God's protection before becoming involved in power encounters.

Renouncing the devil and all his works was often part of the early baptismal formulas of the church. In some places, baptism was followed by the administration of the oil of exorcism. The lack of a deliberate renunciation of the devil may account for why some converts revert to Islam. They were never fully set free. We might reflect on the Biblical evidence that unbelievers need release from bondage and why the declaration of Christ as liberator is generally more meaningful to the Muslim than the promise of the assurance of the forgiveness of sins.

Teaching always, and signs and wonders sometimes, should be the general pattern of our ministry as it was for Paul. (Romans 15:18-19). The guidance, filling and anointing of the Holy Spirit are the requisites for an effective ministry to Muslims and all people. We rely not on our methods and rituals but on the power of the living, triune God.

Who has bewitched you?
Patronage, blessing and the Evil Eye
Abstract

Relationships and economics in every culture are based around issues of access to resources and their distribution through society. This paper suggests that these issues underlie the functioning of forces of failure such as the evil eye and of success such as blessing, as well as the social institution of patronage. The first half of the paper explores the working of positive and negative forces, understandings of reality and power, and the importance of reciprocity and its role in patronage relationships. The second half asks how these issues are redrawn in the Bible: the Bible's attitude to other forces in a monotheistic perspective, and patronage as a way to understand our relationship with God and grace. Blessing (baraka) and the evil eye in the Bible are also examined: before asking how the three themes inform each other, and in particular how as God's people we can respond to those who may be under-resourced, disempowered, or living in fear of the evil eye.
Introduction

A group of senior academics, many of them with doctorates from western universities, are discussing the recent death of a colleague. They have no doubt it was the result of the evil eye.

Walking along the road in a rural town, I smile at the baby on the lap of a woman sitting on the pavement, selling greens from her basket. The woman wipes her forehead with the back of her hand. It’s a hot day, and it might be just a gesture to wipe the off the sweat and dust. But she is using the palm of her hand to ward off evil that might come from me noticing her child.

A multistorey office building has just gone up in a wealthy suburb of the expanding capital city. Above the imposing entrance door is the turquoise shape of an eye, a prophylactic device to repel envy, whether from competitors or passers-by.

In societies where there are limited resources and not everyone has access to the resources that do exist, the problem of distribution becomes a key part of how the community negotiates social life and interaction. Who has access to commodities? How are those commodities are moved through the community from those who possess them to those who require them? In such a context, people seek access to blessing or power to negotiate life’s inequities and hazards. And the same context of limited resources and issues of distribution undergirds both the operation of the ‘evil eye’, and the social mechanism of patronage.
Power

In almost all societies there are rituals, objects or phrases that are used to manipulate power – to attract positive power or avert negative power. Whether it is the rituals or talismans adopted by top athletes before a competition, the ‘touch wood’ protective invocation and gesture, the caution around Friday 13th or the number ‘4’ in Chinese communities, the influence of feng shui in building designs, or the ubiquitous ‘blue bead’ that has spread from Mediterranean societies to countries around the world, people seek ways to protect themselves against evil and danger, and to attract success and well-being for life. Positive forces are those that are life-giving or life-enhancing, promoting productivity and success: powers of blessing. Negative forces are life-withering or life-diminishing, failure-inducing forces: powers of cursing or sorcery.67 The powers may be exercised voluntarily, or be involuntary, occurring without a person's deliberate intent.

We may compare these forces to something like electricity – invisible, but real and powerful. Its impact is felt when we come into direct contact with it! Electricity impacts our daily life, bringing benefits of heat, light and power for the devices we use for life and work: but when it is misused it can have deadly repercussions. So positive and negative forces can be experienced in people's lives as real, with real-life consequences. And as unintended objects can become conductors of electricity, whether via lightening or the connection of live wires, so these forces may operate through people involuntarily, as well as being used with voluntary intent.

The lives of women can be deeply marked by fertility or barrenness, fundamental life-giving or life-withering forces. Rites of passage, including birth, weddings and also circumcision rituals, are crucial times to seek positive forces of blessing, and protection from negative forces of envy. Women are centrally involved in these times of transition: and often hold positions of

power as practitioners, including midwives, exorcists, washers of the dead, reciters of the Qur’an and shaykhas.68

**Failure-forces: Envy and the Evil Eye**

Failure-forces work against others to harm or diminish them, their power or success. Examples include curses and sorcery, using spells or magic to hurt others: and also the force of envy, or the evil eye.69 The following discussion of the evil eye as a failure-force may offer a way to reflect on other failure-forces, including sorcery and curses.

George Foster originally developed the theory of the ‘image of limited good’ in the context of small communal closed system societies who view:

*their social, economic and natural universes – their total environment – as one in which all of the desirable things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply. If ‘good’ exists in limited amounts which cannot be expanded, and if the system is closed, it follows that an individual or a family can improve a position only at the expense of others.*

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This understanding of restricted resources is not limited to small peasant societies. A version of it is known as the ‘zero-sum-game’ in game theory and in economics. We can recognize the same worldview behind the competitive attitudes in companies and sometimes even Christian organisations, which talk of ‘fishing in the same pond’ for financial resources or

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69 In many languages the two are used in parallel: to ‘envy’ someone is actually to cast the evil eye on them. In this paper I will use envy and evil eye as synonyms.
recruits. If there are limited funds or recruits or students, then the gain of ‘another’ society or college will mean loss for ‘ours’.  

In large societies, individuals or groups can freely compete with one another for limited resources. However in more restricted or more communal societies, such open competition is too destructive of relationships and devastating to the social fabric. In such a context, where one person’s good fortune is understood to mean that others will have less, failure-forces can have the social impact of leveling. Sorcery or envy acts against the success of others, so that one person will not prosper at the expense of others.

Belief in the life-withering force of envy, or the evil eye, exists through much of the Muslim world and beyond – in the Middle East and North Africa, around the Mediterranean and up into Europe, into the Balkans, and it appears in some parts of Latin America. Even where belief in the evil eye does not exist, envy (which underlies the evil eye) is linked with sorcery in countries around the world, among wealthy and poor, highly educated and illiterate. A discussion of the evil eye can be extended to the malignant failure-biased power of envy wherever it occurs.

The ‘evil eye’ is an eye that is believed to be capable of harming, or even killing, living beings by looking at them, whether or not harm is intended by the owner of the eye. Its malignant envious power may be consciously or unconsciously exercised. In many societies, young boys may be dressed as girls, with long hair, as a way of tricking and so protecting them from envious or evil spirits that could harm them. Admiring someone’s new car or their child can draw attention to it, and so attract the notice of malevolent forces. On one occasion as we joined in the seventh-day celebration for the new-born baby of our neighbour’s relatives, the aunt took a piece of paper and tore it into the rough shape of a person. She took a pin and

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72 Elliott notes that while belief in the evil eye is not universal, it occurs in all six major regions of the world: sub-Saharan Africa, Circum-Mediterranean, East Eurasia, insular-Pacific, North America, Central and South America. “In the ancient Near East and Circum-Mediterranean area, it appears to have been ubiquitous.” (Elliott, 2015:39-40) See also https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/in-a-world-of-limited-good/, https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/fear-of-the-evil-eye/, https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/envy-and-blessing/ for further discussion of how the evil eye functions in the Muslim world.
began piercing the paper doll, “Against the eye of Ahmed; against the eye of Fatima; against the eye of Hamid…” and we heard our own names in the list. She was not ascribing evil intent to us, but rather protection for the baby from involuntary harm.

Discussion of these forces is linked to an understanding of cause. We often ask ‘what’ questions about things that happen - was an accident caused by over-worn tires or by a tired driver? What bacteria made someone sick? However questions about envy or sorcery are usually more ‘why’ questions, questions of ultimate cause - why did that passing bacteria get inhaled by this child and not another? Why did the tires blow as the bus was going around the corner? Or why did an oncoming car appear just at that moment?

Mediaeval English lists of herbs (and also contemporary wiccan ones!) include herbs such as anise for protection against the evil eye, or dried dill to be carried in a bag over the heart. Different societies have other means of protection: through the area once covered by the Persian Empire, burning a type of herb seed called espha or esfand on charcoal is seen as protective; and in south Asia people entering a home may be greeted with the acrid fumes of chili burned for protection. Sprinkling salt is sometimes used to keep envy away. People seek safety by invoking the name of God, or reciting Qur'anic verses or having them painted or displayed in a home or on a vehicle. In many places the colour blue (or red in some regions) is believed to offer protection from envy. Friends offered me blue beads to wear when I was pregnant, or to pin on the clothes of a newborn child (pregnancy and childhood are seen as times of increased vulnerability to evil forces). Other protective objects include the palm of a hand, known as the khamsa (five, from the five fingers), or an object in the shape of an eye. The

73 Ma’sAllah (what God wills) is a commonly-used protective invocation.
74 Al-Baqarah 2:255 (known as the Kursi [Throne] verse) is believed to offer safeguard:
“God! There is no god but He, the Ever Living, the Sustainer-Protector. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and on the earth. Who is he that can intercede with Him except with His permission? He knows what happens to them in this world and in the hereafter. And they will never encompass anything of His knowledge except that which He wills. His footstool (Kursi) extends over the heavens and the earth, and he feels no fatigue in guarding them. And He is the Most High, the Most Great.” (Al-Hilali & Khan)
Faced with potential evil, Muslims will often use the invocation “I take refuge in God” (A’udh billahi), found in Al-Nahl 16:98, Al-Falaq 113:1 and Al-Nas 114:1: see also Al-Mu’minun 23:97-8.
print of a hand dipped in blood of a newly killed sheep can be used to safeguard a new car or house or pump.

In Islam the evil eye is referred to in the Qur’an (Al-Falaq 113:5) and discussed more extensively in the hadith.75 John Elliott’s recent four-volume study demonstrates that practices related to the evil eye were widespread in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia (Vol. 1) and in Greek and Roman society (Vol. 2): were referred to in the Bible (Vol. 3): and that belief in the evil eye continued to be active in the centuries following the establishment of the early Church (Vol. 4). Elliott summarises the constellation of beliefs around the evil eye, noting “the remarkable cross-cultural and cross-generational consistency in the ideas and motifs associated with the Evil Eye and its aversion – from 3000 BC to 600 CE”, which has also continued “from the medieval period down to the modern era.”76 These are:

- The eye as active, able to project energy that can harm or destroy whatever its glance strikes.
- The evil eye activated by and conveying envy, miserliness, greed and other related negative emotions.
- It can be intentionally or unintentionally activated.
- Its victims include particularly children, birthing mothers, attractive youths, and those enjoying success in life, including in the domestic sphere, sport and battle.
- Those who are likely to possess the evil eye include widows, strangers, those with physical impairments or unusual eyes or features around the eyes.
- Defence against the impact of the evil eye can be through words, gestures, rituals and amulets.

75 For example: al-Bukhari Book 55 #590, Book 71 #634, 635, 636; Book 72 #784, 827: Sahih Muslim Book 001 #0425; Book 024 #5280: Abu-Dawud Book 1 #0036, Book 28 #3875, 3879: Malik’s Muwatta Book 49 #49.12.39, Book 50 #50.1.1, 50.2.3, 50.2.4. https://www.searchtruth.com/
76 Elliott 2017:157 (original capitalisation).
The evil eye is claimed to be responsible for sickness, misfortune, defeat in battle or sport, accidents, property loss and death.\(^77\)

**Success-forces: Blessing**

The opposite of failure-biased powers such as envy is blessing (baraka), a success-biased power. Other examples of success-biased forces include *mana* in Polynesian culture, and *luck* (westerners often tend to use phrases such as “we’re blessed” or “we’re lucky” interchangeably). As a life-giving or life-enhancing force, *baraka* can be found throughout the Muslim world. It is believed to bring protection, healing, fertility and fruitfulness, success and well-being. Success-forces are for flourishing.

Blessing is most often acquired through direct contact, when the healing flow transfers from the source or conduit to the person seeking *baraka*. It is common through the Muslim world to see women and men at shrines, praying, touching the shrine, or leaving a piece of material which belongs to the person seeking blessing from the holy person buried there. Blessing can also be gained via imitation: through having a copy of the person or object of power, or through rituals that copy their actions.\(^78\)

Other common sources of *baraka* in Islam can include *objects* like the Qur'an (written or recited), water from the spring of Zamzam at Mecca, or water or oil that has had verses from the Qur'an immersed in it or recited over it: special *times* such as Ramadan; and *places* or *people* who are associated with *baraka*, whether official religious places and practitioners; or sites (trees, rocks or springs) and people who are known to have power in the informal religious sphere.

Women often carry primary responsibility for health and harmony in both social (extended family) and also spiritual domains. Hence they seek *baraka* for healing, fertility, harmony or success in a business venture. I would sometimes sit with women in the extended

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\(^77\) Elliott, 2017:159.

\(^78\) See Taussig (1993) for an engaging discussion of contact, imitation and power across cultures: also Dale (2016:94-97) in this context.
family in my neighbourhood while they recited the Qur’an simultaneously (each one reciting one or two different portions), with the intent of bringing general blessing on the participants and the household where it was held, and on occasions for specific blessing for success in a new business venture, or for healing for someone in hospital.

**Where does reality and power lie?**

Some of us come to the Muslim world from contexts characterised by the ‘excluded middle’ described by Paul Hiebert;\(^7^9\) we understand the empirical visible world of science, and we believe in God: but we live with a functional agnosticism about other spiritual forces and beings.

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A post-enlightenment worldview can be characterised by a dualism between material and spiritual, the seen and the unseen worlds - the left-hand column in Figure 1. So westerners commonly draw a division between the seen and unseen world, the empirical and the supernatural. Most of our daily life is based on interaction with the empirical world. Our understanding of the unseen world focuses on the high or cosmic level, concerned with God,

\(^7^9\) “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” 1994.
Satan, and questions related to the ultimate purpose of this life, and our destiny in the next. We are largely unaware or agnostic with regard to the middle level, unseen and this-worldly. Living with no conscious experience of the impact of these unseen powers, we may be at a loss to know how to understand people for whom the active presence of such forces is part of daily life.

However for many other peoples in the world, the division is between the forces of this world (both seen and unseen), and the other-worldly, cosmic forces, which are beyond our power to control or manipulate - the right-hand column. The this-worldly concerns of life need urgent attention: How can I keep my husband faithful to me? How can I become pregnant? How can I ensure this crop will flourish? Or my children succeed in school? Or a family member recover from illness? Particularly where so much of life is characterized by uncertainty or precariousness, these issues require engagement with the ‘folk’ unseen powers and principalities of this world which must be placated or manipulated, as much as with seen or empirical ‘natural’ factors.

**Patronage and reciprocity**

Relationships offer another way to access power and resources. In societies around the world, reciprocity is the fundamental principle that undergirds the movement of material and social resources within societies: and reciprocity in giving and receiving is the foundation on which relationships are built and maintained. Initiative requires response. To be part of a relational network is to participate in the exchange of gifts: and conversely, to give or receive a gift is to enter into a relationship. This system of gift exchange is never completely balanced: if both want the relationship to continue, then someone owes and someone is owed. And the system is maintained through mutual indebtedness, whether of symbolic, social or economic value.

This is an important dimension for women in many societies, who carry primary responsibility for maintaining harmony in communal relationships (both human and spiritual).

Marcel Mauss in his foundational essay ‘The Gift’ observes that gift exchange is often linked with rites of passage such as birth, circumcision, menarche, marriage and death, and women are centrally involved at such rites. For this reason too, early rabbinical sources viewed a man preventing his wife from lending kitchen goods to a neighbour or from mourning with a bereaved friend, as grounds for divorce: because not being able to give deprived the woman of the social credit she needed for the future.

Exchanging gifts does not constitute a ‘paying off’ of indebtedness. Rather, accepting a gift implies the commitment to return a gift, in what is a further ‘investing into’ the relationship. The aim of the exchange is not independence, but rather interdependence. In this exchange, gifts do not have to be equal, either in substance or in amount. In hierarchical societies, relationship-exchanges are marked by unequal reciprocity. In collectivist hierarchical communities, this exchange of unequal reciprocity takes place through patronage. The patron offers access to resources such as material goods, protection, influence or employment: economic, political or spiritual benefit. And the client responds with public gratitude, loyalty (even when it is costly, for example if the patron is out of favour), and sometimes service, gifts, and visits.

In patronage relationships, the role of the intermediary or broker is important. David deSilva comments: “Sometimes the most important gift a patron could give was access to (and influence with) another patron who actually had power over the benefit being sought.” The patron broker incurs a debt, and increases her or his own honour through the indebtedness of the client. Brokerage is a highly valued benefit, where the broker is the trusted intermediary who opens the door to a group or individual to whom the client needs access.

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81 Mauss 1925 / 2016:66.
83 John Barclay comments that “recipients of gifts are under a strong (though non-legal) obligation to make some return for a gift – even if only in gratitude.... it may be best to conclude more generally that the return of the gift represents the desire to reproduce social relations: each party to the gift-relation is in some sense ‘produced’ by the exchange between them, and social relations can only be maintained or reproduced in the continual motion of exchange. In this sense, the counter-gift is rarely the end of the relationship, replacing an inequality with a stable equilibrium: it is liable to constitute, rather, a form of ‘giving-again,’ adding to the gift-relationship a continuing forward momentum.” (2015:18).
84 deSilva, 2000:97.
As we enter other cultures, local people become our patrons in the new community. Whether it is our landlord or landlady, or the head of our sponsoring organisation, they are the ones who give us access to and acceptability in the society which we are entering. Others seek to make us their patrons. It may be by giving us a gift, or else people with whom we establish a relationship – the woman who is our domestic help, the beggar we give to at the door. Life and daily transactions flow along relational lines.

Neither is gift exchange only material. Non-material resources can be some of the most valuable commodities in a society, more important even than life: such as honour, reputation and prestige. Most of the resources described by Foster in a context of limited good are non-material: not just ‘land, wealth, health’ but also ‘friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety.’  

Paul Hiebert describes the understanding of limited resources in patronage relationships:

*People jealously guard what they have, including relationships. They jealously guard and cultivate their relationships to powerful individuals and seek to reserve the attention of these patrons for themselves. They assume that the bounty of a generous patron is easily spread thin.*

The patronage system is held in place by social sanctions of honour and shame. The honourable higher-status person is expected to act as patron for clients of lower social strata. And for the honourable beneficiary, behaviour such as not returning a kindness or gift, or repaying favour with insult or injury, is to be avoided at all costs.  

Patronage becomes abusive or destructive when the mutual reciprocity is unbalanced. To give when the recipient is unable to respond - giving in order to control - is to establish relationships of *paternalism* and unhealthy dependency. The client becomes trapped in debt and is unable to balance the

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85 See his earlier quote. Similarly, Martin Munyao writing on honour in an African context suggests that “honor itself (NOT factors that either maintain or diminish it) is a limited good from man’s (sic) perspective in most African cultures.” [http://honorshame.com/limited-good/](http://honorshame.com/limited-good/), comment posted November 6 2015.

86 Hiebert 2008: 136. I am less convinced by his application of this to patterns of learning.

relationship. And to extort exorbitant favours from the client is to build relationships of exploitation, leaving the client in a position of subservience, where the patron does not give in return. A proper model of giving does not disempower the recipient, but enables both to make significant contributions to the relationship.

Patronage relationships can cross gender (and ethnic) cultural restrictions; women patrons may exercise considerable social influence. Lyn Cohick describes how in the early centuries, “With the practice of public and private benefaction, women gained access to centres of influence and persons of power. As a patron, a woman received public honour; with that came the expectation of privilege and respect. … Benefaction downplayed the gender of the giver.” This is still true today in countries even with strong social divisions around gender, where women take positions of national leadership, often following family lines (for example, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia).

What does the Bible say?

Spiritual powers as well as beings, envy and the evil eye, blessing, patronage – these may be part of life for many, but they are unfamiliar territory for many in the western world. How are we to think about them? And how does the Bible speak into these contexts?

Unseen Powers

As we look at the cosmic view of seen and unseen forces (Figure 1), we note that the Biblical worldview does not let us relegate God only to an upper ‘other-worldly’ dimension, but shows God as present and involved with us. In the Lord’s Prayer we pray to our Father in the heavens (ο ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς Ho en tois ouranois). We address God intimately as a father, and this God...

88 Chinchen1995.
89 For discussion of patronage as a model of discipleship, see Chinchen 1995, Hine 2017, and Tino 2008.
90 Cohick 2009:323.
does not reside far away in the highest of all the heavens, but fills them all, even to the lowest and closest to us. In God’s spoken Word, ultimate Divinity is revealed fully in human form. God becomes incarnate and present as part of his own creation, walking among us as one of us. And God’s own Spirit is sent now to indwell us. The trinitarian God is cosmic and immanent, all-powerful and also (not pantheistic, but) personal and present with each one of us.

For God’s people in the Bible, spiritual beings and forces were known among the peoples surrounding them, and part of their encounter with their neighbours. The Bible does not deny the existence of these unseen realities; but neither does it accept their existence and power without question. Rather it reinterprets them according to the Biblical worldview of the all-powerful sovereign creator God who chooses to enter into a relationship of covenant faithfulness with his people. The Biblical writers re-envisage the presence and action of positive and negative powers on the basis of central assumptions about the nature of God that are consistent across the writings in Old and New Testament.

**God is one.** The Bible is monotheistic. There is One God, who is omnipotent; and this God is the Creator of all things, whether physical or spiritual. Some created beings may be rebellious against the One Creator, but this is not a dualistic universe: there is no power (including blessing and the evil eye) that exists outside God’s control. God’s oneness and omnipotence is also understood within Islam. Our Muslim friends will agree with stories that affirm the power of God (and God through Jesus) over creation, demons, sickness and even death. However the next two assumptions are not necessary corollaries of the understanding of God within Islam.

**God is always good.** From the first chapter on creation, the Bible teaches us that God is a God of order: he is not disorderly, nor is he arbitrary in his actions or in how he responds to his people. As the Biblical revelation continues, it affirms that God is a God of order and constancy; he is not capricious. And it also teaches us that this God chooses to call his people

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91 The idea of multiple heavens is common across a number of religions. Seven is most often cited in both Jewish and Islamic cosmology. 1 Corinthians 12:2 refers to the third heaven.
into covenant relationship with him, a relationship where he reveals himself as the One who shows faithful love and loyalty (דסח hesed) to his people. If God is all-powerful but capricious, we cannot rely on his help against the hostile powers that surround us. But because he is both all-powerful and God who reveals himself in constant faithful love and loyalty, we can rest secure in his care in the face of all that threatens us.

**God’s initiative requires our response.** Relationship and response go together. While God initiates the relationship through delivering his people (from the flood, slavery, sin), that initiative elicits our response of covenant obedience and faithfulness to God. We are to live in a way that reflects God’s character.

This necessarily excludes attempts to manipulate God or make use of powers as though they are disassociated from him (magic is seeking to manipulate powers unrelated to their source). When powers or forces are treated independently from covenant obedience to God, they may be exploited and utilized, but the results can be erratic, unpredictable. Detached from God, they may be attached to or accessed through material objects, operated with intent: or sometimes operating involuntarily, beyond the plans or purposes of people. Disregard of God or disobedience to his covenant entails danger.

**Patronage**

The covenants in the Bible between God and his people reflect traditional patronage agreements. 92 God invites his people into covenant association, hierarchical relationship with

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92 Sometimes the obligations on the clients or recipients are laid out, as in the ‘suzerain-vassal’ covenant in Exodus 19:4-6. Others follow the ‘royal grant’ model, where God as patron gives a favour unconditionally, with his promise to never again destroy the earth by flood (Genesis 9:11). So too we see God in the New Testament as the generous God who gives rain to the just and the unjust alike (Matthew 5:45). This unconditional endowment to all was exemplified in Roman times in the patron who publicly endowed a city with a fountain or games or an amphitheater. But most often elements of both apply - God gives, and his people are expected to respond. Abraham is given God’s blessing to have a great name and nation: but God also calls him to act, by leaving his country, kindred and family. David is given an unconditional promise of a throne (family) that would be established forever - and his descendants are expected to obey the covenant obligations or face God’s discipline (2 Samuel 7).
reciprocal responsibilities. However in the Bible the patron-relationship is redrawn. It is not
the client or beneficiary who initiates the relationship. Rather it is God, as the most Righteous
Benefactor or Patron, who delivers his people, initiating calling them into a relationship where
they are to live in a way that honours their Benefactor and reflects his nature. Jesus Messiah
is both the most powerful and ultimately self-giving intermediary or broker, who is now at
God’s right hand, interceding on our behalf.

In social situations the positions of patron, client and broker are flexible and can
change in relation to one another according to their needs. This is exemplified in Luke 7:1-10,
where the centurion was patron of the local Jewish community, building them a synagogue.
But when as a non-Jew he needed access to Jesus, seeking healing for his servant, the Jewish
leaders in turn were brokers or intermediaries for him to obtain access to Jesus. In the letter
to Philemon, Paul reminds Philemon of his indebtedness to Paul, and Philemon’s own character
as a benefactor of the early church - and the letter is read in public, invoking the force of
honour and shame to increase the pressure on Philemon to accede to Paul’s request to receive
back his runaway slave without punishing him. And we see women also as patrons: including
the widow of Zarephath with Elijah, the Shunammite woman and Elisha, and the women who
supported Jesus and his disciples out of their resources.\textsuperscript{93}

\textbf{Understanding Grace}

Understanding patronage better gives us more insight into the use of grace in the
Bible. The term ‘grace’ has its primary roots in economic relationships, patronage and
reciprocity, the giving and receiving of benefits: and this was the context in which writers and
readers of the New Testament understood it. Grace (\textit{χαρίς charis}) meant first of all the willing
attitude of generosity of the benefactor. It also referred to the attitude of gratitude and
loyalty from the recipient. And the secondary meaning of \textit{charis} was the actual gift or favour
that was the result of the benefactor’s attitude.

\textsuperscript{93} 1 Kings 17, 2 Kings 4:8ff, Luke 8:2-3.
In ‘The Gift’, Marcel Mauss discusses the three obligations in gift exchange: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive and the obligation to reciprocate. His description mirrors Seneca’s much earlier identification of the three Graces of mythology (the Greek Charites, or Roman Gratiae) with the giving, the receiving, and the returning of the gift. As the Graces perform their dance, the links must be maintained. Seneca commented on their dance that, “the beauty of the whole is destroyed if the course is anywhere broken.” In a system of honour, grace must be requited by grace, a favour returned with favour, the gift with gratitude. To not respond to a gift or favour is to break the dance and dis-grace the dance or the relationship.

This reciprocity undergirds God’s patronage relationship of grace with his people. In many of the New Testament epistles, Paul describes the gifts and promises that God, our patron, gives us, and then describes how we, as honourable clients or beneficiaries should respond, with gratitude, loyalty, and behaviour that is commensurate with honouring our Benefactor. Initiative requires response: as recipients of God’s freely-given grace, we are to live lives of loyalty and public praise, behaving in ways that reflect the honour, character and values of our divine Benefactor.

If in the Bible we see God as showing us what honourable patronage looks like, how does the Bible treat the forces of baraka and of the evil eye, also present in situations of limited access to resources?

**The Bible and blessing - baraka**

*Baraka* in the Bible is God’s life-giving power, leading to fruitfulness and success. God blesses the earth to be fruitful, and blesses his people so that they will multiply and fill the earth. As Jesus blesses the loaves and fishes, they multiply to feed thousands. And his blessing flows

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94 1925 / 2016:121-126.
95 Cited in deSilva, 2000:106.
96 So Ephesians 4:1ff, 1 Corinthians 1:3-10; Galatians 1:3-6. See also John Barclay (2015) for a comprehensive discussion of grace in Paul’s writings, with a focus on Galatians and Romans.
98 Genesis 1:28; Psalm 67; Matthew 14:19-20.
out to bring healing and life to those he touches: to children, lepers, a bleeding woman, the paralysed and lame, the demonised and even the dead. Blessing can be linked in the Bible with places at different times (Shiloh, the Temple), with people (Melchizedek, Balaam, fathers blessing their sons, the priests: Jesus and his followers) and even objects (the ark of the tabernacle, Jesus’ clothing). It can be passed on through the spoken word, through physical touch, and through anointing oil.

However in the Bible baraka is never something to be manipulated or used independently of God who is the source of blessing. Used inappropriately or carelessly it is deadly. Attempts to manipulate this power separate from covenant obedience to God could only lead to danger, defeat or even death.99 As God’s people, living now in obedience to the new covenant law of the Spirit, we are to be conduits of God’s power, blessing, to others. Blessing can only be properly used in relationship to the One All-powerful God: and we are to live in obedience to God and reflect his nature in blessing others.

**The Bible and the Evil Eye**


These find their context in the extensive beliefs and practices involving the evil eye in the surrounding societies of the time. However in the Bible, the evil eye is not viewed as an

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100 Other probable references to the evil eye include 1 Samuel 18:9; and Ecclesiastes 4:4-8 (Wazana 2007). See Elliott Vol.3 also for an examination of related passages in the deuterocanonical books.
101 Further references to the pernicious force of envy can be found in lists in Mark 7:22, Romans 1:29, Philippians 1:15, James 4:2, 1 Peter 2:1. And the gospel writers mention it as the motive of the Jewish leaders in having Jesus arrested: Matthew 27:10, Mark 15:10.
independent force. It refers to people's attitudes of stinginess, meanness and unwillingness to share – the opposite of attitudes that reflect God's generosity.⁴⁰² While the ‘evil eye’ of Hebrew is usually translated into Greek in the Septuagint as ‘evil eye’ or sometimes as to ‘bewitch’ (βασκαίνω baskaino), English translations of both Hebrew and Greek often translate the phrase ‘evil eye’ with reference to attitudes of stinginess, meanness or envy.

What about the 10th commandment: You shall not covet what belongs to your neighbour?⁴⁰³ Is it another reference to the evil eye and prohibiting envy? While there is certainly a relationship between the concepts, they seem to be different. The evil eye is destructive of good that another person possesses. Coveting is more acquisitive, seeking to possess for oneself that which is owned by another person.⁴⁰⁴ The second five commandments concern human attitudes and actions, destructive of community: but in a different dimension to the forces of baraka and envy. Again, when we look at the contrasting pole of each, we see that the opposite of envy is generosity. The opposite of coveting is being content with what one has.

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⁴⁰² The description of a ‘good eye’ is linked to the attitude of generosity (Proverbs 22:9; also Sirach 35:8,10). The Matthew 6 and Luke 11 passages indicate the eye, not as a source of good or evil power in itself, but an indicator of heart attitude to God and others.⁴⁰³ Exodus 20:17 ⁴⁰⁴ “Coveting aims at gain for oneself. Envy and an Evil Eye, by contrast, seek loss for others.” (Elliott Vo.l 3: p.73.) Original italics.
When the other desiring person, who Girard describes as the mediator of our desire, is at a similar level to us, then rivalry develops, which can quickly escalate into violence. The Exodus command is to not covet, to not enter the cycle of desire, rivalry and violence. The terms are different to those linked with envy and the evil eye. The word in the Exodus passage for covet (חֲמָד hamad) is linked to the word for Eve's desire for the forbidden fruit. The Greek form (ἐπιθυμεῖν epitumeo) is taken up into the discussion of the Law in Romans 7:7ff, Romans 13:9 and James 4:2, with the latter describing the consequent escalation of conflict.

Is your Eye Evil?

How do these themes of the evil eye, blessing and patronage/grace draw together? Can patronage illuminate the Biblical response to the action of the evil eye in society?

We know that there is no power (including the evil eye) that can operate independently of the One Omnipotent God. And it is this God who calls us into relationship with Him, whereby we can depend on his protection and love from all that might threaten us (Romans 8:35-39). The evil eye functions in a world of limited good, of restricted resources: but God as our Benefactor offers us access to blessing as his promise and power for fruitfulness and flourishing.

Matthew 20:1-16 recounts the parable of the workers in the vineyard. When the time comes to give wages, the landowner, in prodigal generosity, gives everyone a full day’s earnings regardless of the amount of time they've worked. When those who were first hired grumble, the landowner asks them, “Is your eye evil (οφθαλμός poneros) because I am

105 For further discussion of the rest of Girard’s theory, including conflict and its resolution through the scapegoat, with reference to literature, religions, and the alternative perspective of Christianity, see Girard 1978, 1989, 1996.
generous?” In our own attitudes, we are not to harbor envy, but rather to reflect the generosity of our Divine patron.¹⁰⁸

God gives extravagantly to the vineyard workers who have only worked half a day or even only an hour. And God’s extraordinary generosity that goes beyond what is needed is again demonstrated abundantly in feeding the five thousand men, plus women and children, where the handful of bread and fish blessed by Jesus is not only adequate, but extends to twelve baskets full of leftovers (Matthew 14:13-21). We see God’s expansive provision similarly after feeding the four thousand men plus women and children (this time in non-Jewish territory), with seven baskets full of leftovers (Matthew 15:32-39).

The Bible tells us that this world is not characterized by limited good, but by God’s blessing shown in lavish, overflowing goodness and provision. The omnipotent God is for us as, our patron; and our covenant relationship with him is binding, confirmed by God’s own promise and God’s own Son. We are to respond to his generous blessing with public praise, telling who God is and what he offers those who are his: grace reciprocated by grace, generosity by honour and praise.

However in many of the contexts in which we work, people face limited opportunities and access to education, work and material needs. Their daily experience is of a world of limited good, limited access to resources. How does God’s promise of generous abundance reach their lives? The book of Galatians is one of the places where the Bible suggests the way.

Who has bewitched you?

The epistle to the Galatians is rich with the language of gift and grace, the language of patronage relationship.¹⁰⁹ So Elliott’s suggestion that it also contains a cluster of references to the evil eye should be no surprise.

¹⁰⁸ The description of a ‘good eye’ in the Bible is linked to the attitude of generosity (Proverbs 22:9; also Sirach 35:8,10). Matthew 6:22-23 and Luke 11:34-35 indicate the eye, not as a source of good or evil power in itself, but an indicator of heart attitude to God and others.

¹⁰⁹ Galatians 1:3-4, 6, 15; 2:20-21; 3:2, 14, 18, 22; 5:4; 6:18.
Paul’s letter climaxes at the end of chapter two in his description of the self-giving of the Son, the grace of God (Galatians 2:21-22). It is this grace which opens up the gift of the Spirit, and participating in the blessing of Abraham to the nations: the opposite of that blessing is cursing.\textsuperscript{110}

Then Paul goes straight on to ask the Galatians, “Who has bewitched you?” (\textit{tis umas ebaskanen}) (Galatians 3:1). Elliott translates it, “Who has injured you with an envious Evil Eye?” noting that \textit{baskaine} was the traditional Greek expression for harming with the evil eye.\textsuperscript{111} He suggests that this allusion highlights a cluster of other references in Galatians 4:12-20 to beliefs and practices associated with the evil eye. Spitting (4:14: \textit{exepusaste} \textit{exemptusate} is to spit, but it is usually translated into English bibles as ‘despise’ or ‘reject’
) was practised to ward off evil spirits or evil eye. People suspected of having an evil eye included strangers, people with ailments, and those who were blind or had some abnormal feature to do with their eyes. When Paul arrived in Galatia, he had some kind of ailment (4:13), and verse 15 suggests that it may have had to do with his eyes. Elliott suggests that it could have been an aftereffect of when Paul was struck blind.\textsuperscript{112} He also mentions an early tradition describing Paul as having conjoined eyebrows,\textsuperscript{113} which was also sometimes linked with possessors of the evil eye). Zeal (4:17-18) can also be translated as ‘envy’. And the language of children and childbirth highlights times of risk and vulnerability to the evil eye (4:19-20).\textsuperscript{114}

How is God’s abundant beneficence to be evident in this newly-emerging Christ-community, still under threat from the beliefs and practices of the surrounding societies? Paul calls the Galatians as God’s people, to live in a way that honours their divine Benefactor, by reflecting his own self-giving character. Rather than displaying community-destroying, competitive attitudes and actions, they are to be formed into new communities; communities

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Elliott, Vol. 3: 218ff and 259. This is the traditional expression in the Greek world for injuring with an evil eye (see the LXX translation of Deuteronomy 28:54, 56). Jerome translates it in the Vulgate as \textit{fascinavit}, which is the Latin equivalent for the malice of envy and the evil eye.
\item This is described three times in Acts (9:3-19; 22:4-16; 26:9-18).
\item Paul is described as “a man of small stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness.” (Acts of Paul & Thecla, c.185-195 CE). Elliott Vol.3:247.
\item Here we see reflected many of the earlier list of motifs associated with the evil eye.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
which demonstrate non-competitive, pro-social behaviour, community-building attitudes and actions (5:19-24). Instead of competing and envying (5:26) they are to reciprocally and sacrificially serve and help one another (6:2, 6). Where people face limited good, limited access to resources, God’s promise of blessing and provision is also to be shown through the ungrudging open-handed generosity of his people caring for those in need.115

**Against the Evil Eye**

How may we take this re-reading of the Bible back into contexts where people live with fear of the evil eye? If God is understood as remote, in the cosmic distant dimension, then people will seek the help of amulets and rituals, using power against power, to protect themselves against the evil eye. Stories of God’s power may confirm their understanding in his omnipotence, but not challenge a belief in his nature as arbitrary.

So we may instead choose to tell stories of how God is both omnipotent and also personal, who binds himself to us in a relationship of covenant love. The Jesus who raised Lazarus from death is the one who himself is deeply moved to tears by our grief, who cares for two sisters who have lost their protector, and who asks us to completely trust him and his word: “Didn’t I tell you that if you believed, you would see God’s glory?” Again he asks his disciples where their trust in him is, as he calms the storm. And he shows his care for a bereaved widow in returning her only son to her alive.116 As people place their trust in Jesus he heals, even forgives sins.117 And God’s relationship of covenant love with us is utterly secure, even beyond death itself. In response to God’s generous blessing in our lives, he also empowers us to speak of him, and to act with generosity in ways that reflect his honour and glory.

The Bible calls us to oppose the evil eye by acting in ways which reflect God’s generosity. And we are also empowered to speak blessing, as recipients of God’s blessing,

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117 Luke 8:48, 50; 5:20; 7:50
particularly through the powerful indwelling Spirit of Christ. Admiring babies or new possessions may expose them to the malignant power of the evil eye. Rather than words of admiration, we can speak words of blessing, of God’s power for protection and healing over babies, and those who are vulnerable. We are not called to admire: but as God’s people we are empowered to bless with the power / *baraka* of God.

**Conclusion**

In societies of limited good, where there is restricted access to social and material resources, the evil eye acts as a life-diminishing power. The opposite, *baraka*, or blessing, is a life-enhancing power. Patronage relationships of unequal reciprocity and mutuality allows patrons to receive honour and loyalty in return for giving their clients or beneficiaries access to needed material or sometimes relational provisions.

The Bible does not dismiss or deny the evil eye. It describes the evil eye in terms of meanness and lack of generosity. God as our divine Benefactor calls us into relationship with Him, offering us his blessing and power. And He calls us into relationship with one another, to live in ways that honour God by reflecting his character through generous giving and sacrificially building each other up. Grace, gifts of blessing, are not given for the sake of the individual recipient, but to build up God’s people, the body of Christ.

People need not fear the malevolent power of the evil eye not only because of God’s power, but also his faithful covenant commitment to us in loving loyalty. God’s unlimited generosity and power in blessing is the opposite of limited good and restricted access to resources. And this bountiful blessing is mediated by God’s people, as they live lives of sacrificial and extravagant generosity to those in need, and which transmit God’s power and protection to the vulnerable or weak.
References


Understanding and dealing with the spirit world
Abstract

This paper examines Kraft’s claim that ‘Western perspectives have crippled [Westerners] when it comes to understanding and dealing with the spirit world.’ It is argued that the western worldview typically separated the material and spiritual worlds, unlike the integrated view of animists who engage with the spirit world. As a result, Western Christians have neglected temporal concerns, and the fear of spiritual powers which are so strong for animists. This has deterred animists from Christianity or led to split-level Christianity. However, there are also approaches such as critical contextualization which utilize parts of Western worldview to help Christians engage appropriately with the spirit world, and there are many examples where good work has occurred despite the dualistic western bias. So Kraft’s use of the word ‘crippled’ is overstated. Moreover, the western worldview Kraft refers to is simplistic given the renewed interest and openness to the spiritual that is evident in the modern west.

Introduction

An 18 year old woman presents to the mental health clinic, claiming to be possessed by jinn. Six months ago, her family engaged her to a much older man who she does not want to marry. Also six months ago, a mullah was praying that a jinn would be expelled from her mother, and the jinn entered the client. Now her sleep and appetite are disordered, and she has possession episodes where her voice changes, and through her voice, the jinn orders her not to go out of the house, or to come to the clinic. Western psychiatry would suggest some kind of dissociative expression of her distress about the marriage\textsuperscript{119}. However, the family is convinced that the cause is spiritual not psychological.

Kraft claims that ‘Western perspectives have crippled [Westerners] when it comes to understanding and dealing with the spirit world’.\textsuperscript{120} This paper will consider what western perspectives are being referred to, and to what extent Kraft’s claim is valid. Those people for whom ‘the primary reality is that of the spirit world and the natural world is an expression of it’,\textsuperscript{121} will be referred to as animists and will be contrasted with Westerners.

What Western perspectives are in view?

‘Perspectives’ is assumed to refer to worldview, which Kraft defines as the ‘culturally structured set of assumptions... underlying how people perceive and respond to reality’.\textsuperscript{122} Hiebert identifies the attitudes of the 17\textsuperscript{th} Century as the origin of western worldview. These include: the belief of superiority that accompanied colonisation, the advance of cultural evolutionism which saw some cultures as more advanced than others, and the influence of the

\textsuperscript{120} Kraft, \textit{Anthropology for Christian Witness}, 84.
\textsuperscript{121} Denise Hodgman, “‘The Flaw of the Excluded Middle’ among the Cree People of Canada” (Providence Theological Seminary, 2004), 12.
Enlightenment. At that time, science with its emphasis on experience, testing and proof became the preeminent tool to explain the world. This left little room for the supernatural and resulted in a dualistic worldview that separated the material and spiritual worlds.

For western Christians in particular, this created a dichotomy between the ‘low’ material world of science, and spirit world, which was limited to ‘high’ religious thought, preoccupied by ultimate issues such as salvation and eternal destiny. The middle level, of interaction with spirits, ghosts, demons, ancestors, jinn etc, was completely excluded. Although many western Christians theoretically assent to their reality based on the examples that litter the Bible, they struggle to integrate it into their practical worldview. Animists, for whom the middle is essential, explain matters of daily importance such as sickness, infertility and drought through the activity of these spiritual beings, while westerners look for rational or scientific explanations and reference germs, genetics and meteorology. Scientists have been so unable to cope with the idea of unseen spiritual beings that they have sought a scientific explanation for the phenomenon of the movement of Ouija boards.

This western dualistic perspective is evident in the staff at the mental health clinic. When asked for an explanation for the client’s symptoms, all replied “The Qur’an says that jinn

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124 Robin Dale Hadaway, "Contexualization and Folk Islam: A Case Study in the Sudan" (University of South Africa, 2010), 159.
127 Hiebert, Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues, 196.
130 Zahniser, Symbol and Ceremony, 49; Erwin Van Der Meer, "Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare Theology of C. Peter Wagner and Its Implications for Christian Mission in Malawi" (University of South Africa, 2008), 206.
exist, so I believe in them, however I have never seen their effect in the world, so I think that this case is dissociation/psychosis/malingering.” If we accept Caleb’s argument that Islam traditionally integrates both high and low religion with the material world, we see that having been trained by western (Christian) doctors and nurses, the Afghan clinicians have rejected their traditional worldview in this case.

**Have Western perspectives crippled Westerners in understanding and dealing with the spirit world?**

The western exclusion of the middle has left Western Christians with deficits in understanding and relating to animists and their spirit world. First, since western Christians focus on ‘high’ religion, they tend to neglect temporal concerns such as how to prevent the rains from ruining the crops. In the case of the girl at the clinic, her eternal destiny was of much less concern to her than the man she was engaged to marry. However, this western neglect of the temporal may not be completely crippling in dealing with animists. For example, based on the witness of western Christians, the Cree people gleansed that becoming Christians led to a better life for them and their families – a very temporal concern.

Second, western Christians neglect animists’ fear that they are at the mercy of powerful spiritual forces. Westerners come armed with rational explanations, believing that if they can explain the scientific mechanism for an event, animists will reject their spiritual explanation for the event, negating their fear. Hiebert recalls himself that when he worked

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132 Kim, "Jinn Possession," 68, 82.
133 Hadaway presents an alternative view that Islam is just an overlay on traditional beliefs, and they were never integrated. This does not match my experience with the staff at the clinic, where all explanations about the spirit world are related back to “In Islam….” It may not be Qur’anic Islam, but within the worldview of the clinic staff, Islam and the spirit world were previously integrated. See Hadaway, "Contextualization and Folk Islam,” 76, 78, 236.
134 Ibid., 80-81, 255.
135 Hodgman, “”The Flaw of the Excluded Middle” among the Cree People of Canada,” 34.
136 Hadaway, "Contextualization and Folk Islam,” 16, 195, 226; Hodgman, “”The Flaw of the Excluded Middle” among the Cree People of Canada,” 12, 16, 36; Fannuel Mashoko, "The Need for Contextualization in Inter-Cultural Communication of the Gospel” (University of South Africa, 2005), 56; Meer, "Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare Theology,” 259.
138 Meer, "Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare Theology,” 255.
in India, he was unprepared to answer the questions of his local friends because he presented ‘Christ on the basis of rational arguments, not by evidences of his power in the lives of people who were sick, possessed and destitute...’

Similarly in a Muslim context, folk Muslims focus on the effects of jinn, with only a peripheral awareness of the Qur’an. Yet a large proportion of western Christian interaction with them has been based on weakening the claims of the Qur’an!

Even when they do address practical concerns such as health, western Christians set up hospitals or mental health clinics and explain about germs or vulnerable personalities, never realising that their animistic audiences are hungry for more – they want to know who sent the germs or created the vulnerability!

So at the mental health clinic, the typical western approach has been to treat the ‘dissociative symptoms’, without consideration for the family's belief that the problem is spiritual.

This invalidation of the individual’s lived experience can deter animists from Christianity altogether. If they somehow overcome that, they are likely to have a split-level Christianity where they assent to the doctrines of Christianity but return to traditional healers and spiritual diviners when everyday problems occur. Hodgman records an example of a girl whose grandmother had instilled ‘the fear of God in her' and yet during her last days of life, the grandmother consulted a medicine man to cure her diabetes.

Another Christian who was interviewed saw no contradiction in his intention to smudge his house with the smoke of sweet-grass if the spirit living there became troublesome.

The staff at the clinic also display a split-level worldview. They use rational western explanations to explain mental illness, yet in their personal lives, they outline their babies’ eyes

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139 Hiebert, Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues, 189.
141 Hadaway, "Contextualization and Folk Islam," 139.
143 Zahniser, Symbol and Ceremony, 45.
144 Hiebert, Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues, 198.
145 Hodgman, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle" among the Cree People of Canada," 57.
146 Ibid., 35.
with charcoal, pin evil eye charms to them and ensure they wear a hat at all times, all to protect the baby from jinn.

In line with Kraft’s claim, dualistic Western worldviews have therefore hampered the development of integrated faith in those with animistic worldviews. However, this is not unavoidable, and the Western worldview can even be an asset if used appropriately. Hiebert, Shaw and Tienou advocate a critical contextualization approach that examines the assets and flaws of both western and animistic worldviews, to consider how they might contribute to each other in forming a more biblical worldview.147 Regarding the spirit world, they suggest that the concern for power may be married with western rational explanation by heralding God’s supreme power demonstrated on the cross.148 Utilizing the strength of the scientific rational process, westerners can explore their own biases and then give animists confidence in God’s power over spirits. Given this possibility, Kraft’s claim that Western perspectives have crippled westerners in engaging with the spirit world is overstated.

Moreover, although Hodgman notes that many of the Cree people displayed elements of split-level Christianity, she also noted that the western-Christian witnesses among them had given them many helpful practices in dealing with the spirit world such as praying when they felt dark powers and rebuking those powers in Jesus’ name.149 Based on these experiences, the Cree people went on to develop a strong sense of power from church attendance, prayer, talking with others about Christ, and their own faith in Jesus.150 So even where the western Christians did not actively attempt to overcome the bias of their worldview, they still did much good ministry done among these animistic people. Again, the extremity of Kraft’s statement is unsympathetic to this history.

In the present, Kraft’s view is also simplistic. In the last two decades, there has been a growing dissatisfaction in the West with pure rationalism, and the New Age and spiritualist

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147 Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, Understanding Folk Religions, 383.
149 Hodgman, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle" among the Cree People of Canada," 52.
150 Ibid., 36.
movements have thrived.\textsuperscript{151} This has carried over to Western Christianity,\textsuperscript{152} where there has been a growing interest in middle beings such as angels and demons,\textsuperscript{153} and a general greater openness to the spirit world. As a product of this new openness, I have been able to appropriately focus the staff at the clinic on the spirit world. During the case discussion about the girl with the jinn, I gave an example of seeing my pastor and a baptisee from a strongly Hindu background attacked in church by a man shouting “What do you want with me? Have you come to destroy me? I rebuke you.” My staff appeared shocked that I would admit to such ‘unscientific’ experiences, but it opened up a discussion about jinn in their lives, and the following week, two members of staff approached me to ask how I thought they should respond to the growth of Satanic cults and rituals. Even though I am a westerner whose default is to explain the material world through science, growing up more recently in the West gave me an openness to engage with the spirit world as it manifested in my staff and client’s lives.

\textbf{Conclusion}

It is thus clear that while Kraft's traditional Western worldview does not account for more modern influences, overall he is justified in claiming that Western Christians have struggled to understand and deal with the spirit world. Nevertheless, ‘crippled’ seems to be an overstatement given that there are good examples of Western Christians who have overcome their bias of their worldview to interact effectively with the spirit world, or who have managed good work despite their western bias. Perhaps a more justifiable statement would be: “traditional Western perspectives have hampered [Westerners] in understanding and dealing with the spirit world.”

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References


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 Mashaalla expressed in Arabic script; the car parked outside another house boasts the number plate WAH 33D 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 Bakhoor/ouncie 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” 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 ¾ of the Islamic world practice Folk/Popular Islam and this figure rises to 95% when related to women. 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

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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 Bakhoor/ouncie - incense sometimes made from frankincense gum.
157 Bismillah is an invocation used by Muslim people “in the name of God”
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. 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.

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:

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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.”

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." 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 bring. 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”
- Abraham’s son from death through the miraculous provision of a ram

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363 John 10:10
364 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” to them but his coming will bring wider blessing in that he is also to make ready “a people prepared for the Lord.” Zechariah’s prophetic song speaks of a coming rescue “from the hands of our enemies to enable us to serve him without fear.” 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.” 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 Bailey\(^{176}\) shows how in all verses bar one\(^{177}\) 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 Hebrews\(^{12:2}\) 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  
\(^{175}\) Mark 7:29  
\(^{176}\) Bailey, K., The Good Shepherd. IVP. 2015:61  
\(^{177}\) Psalm 23:4  
\(^{178}\) Luke 1:45
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.”

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” speaks loudly into the spiritual realm and giving the lighted candle reminds us of Christ conquering the darkness of evil.

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.

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*Folk Islam*

*When Women Speak... Webzine*

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