



*The Practise of Patronage
in Diaspora Contexts*

I walked into their home and immediately my car keys were taken from me. “Ahmed will wash your car” I was told. I objected but to no avail. I felt like the superior with the servants fussing around me. It was awful.

“When will you be home?” Abdullah asked. “I will come to clean your carpets. I have a machine.”

Not long after meeting Khadijah and her family, they visited me with gifts – a handbag, chocolates and more. I was uncomfortable for many reasons but mainly because this family had no money, no work, no support, and they had spent money on me. When I reiterated that my actions to them are freely given, that they don’t need to ‘pay me back,’ they agreed and said thank you... and continued to ‘pay me back.’

I had entered into relationships with these families and sought to be a friend to them, helping them navigate western culture and the English language, while exposing them to the God who is generous. My care for them was love freely given. I wanted to be an example of God’s unconditional love and so every part of my being resisted what I saw as being paid back. Questions swirled around my mind: Were they simply being generous to me or did they want something more from me? Am I now obliged to do whatever they want now? If I want this relationship to continue, am I being forced to owe them something? Do they see me as somehow superior to them and they must serve me? And most horrifying of all, Have I now failed in being an authentic example of the gospel?

I haven't experienced the 'textbook' beginnings of a patron-client relationship, namely the request and negotiations of establishment.¹¹⁸ Rather, it seems to be an unspoken way of relating. My Muslim friends aren't able to identify it in their own actions. It just seems to be an instinctive way of being according to their world view, as natural as it is suspicious in a western world view. We want to showcase the God of unconditional love and generosity and patronage seems to obscure it. So how should I understand what is happening in this different way of relating? How should I respond?

The Importance of Understanding My Friends

It has become clear that the gifts and service I receive are not pay back nor are they bribery for an unspoken future need but are something much purer and more important. It's all about expressing their desire to be in relationship with me, an ongoing dance of mutual giving and receiving.

One night Khadija's daughter called me. "Can you help us?" Her mum was unwell and they didn't know what to do. I drove with Khadijah and her husband to the hospital and was simply there, a calming presence in an unfamiliar hospital system. We stayed till the early hours of the morning and I then arranged follow up care for her. How ought she respond to my help? For my Middle Eastern friend, it's not simply about thanking me. It's about valuing the friendship. 'Thank you' doesn't express the honourable nature of our friendship. To keep our relationship healthy, honourable and to prevent the shame of abuse and dysfunction Khadijah invited me to share mansaf (a

¹¹⁸ As detailed, for example, in Delbert Chinchin, "The Patron-Client System: A Model of Indigenous Discipleship," *EMQ* 31 no. 4 (1995): 446-451.

traditional Arab dish) and knafeh (a traditional Middle Eastern dessert) with the family despite them being barely able to pay rent. Honour is more important.

It is important to understand the fundamentals of patron-client relationships so that we might enter into these relationships appropriately and use them for the sake of the gospel.

Patron-client relationships don't tarnish the reputation of the gospel but rather can enhance it.

I want to develop fruitful relationships that will be fertile soil for meaningful spiritual conversations.

I want to use these relational concepts to explain the gospel and what it is to follow Christ.

I want to disciple believers of a Muslim background (BMBs) effectively in the context of relationships they understand.

And this may have extra layers of complexity as we navigate these relationships in a western context. Here, we are on home turf with the knowledge, power, money, and connections. It would be easy for these relationships to become dysfunctional. Just as I don't want to be somehow indebted to them or be at their beck and call, I also don't want to create dependency or trap my friends in an unhelpful cycle of owing me.

So rather than throw out this patron-client way of relating and seek to retrain our friends in what we may see as a more grace-centred way, how can we learn from patronage and use it to introduce our friends to Jesus Christ and help the function well in a western context?

Living a Gospel Life in the Midst of Patron-Client Relationships

Reciprocating Honour

This to and fro of relationship and giving is what my Muslim friends seek and respond to. To reject their gifts (even graciously) is to reject them and any ongoing relationship with them and probably their community.

I will honour them by visiting them, eating their food, and asking for help from them. I have been learning Arabic over several years and my Syrian and Jordanian friends have been gracious teachers and practice partners despite their desire to learn and practise English. As I encourage and correct their English, they have also become confident to correct my Arabic. This is such a humbling experience. I'm meant to be the one with the knowledge and answers in my own country but even the children join in with the correction and critique, with lots of laughter I might add! The frequent texts between us in Arabic serve many functions!

My friends as my teachers can restore their confidence as they try to navigate a strange culture. Their sense of worth and skill can be easily lost in a new country. I will ask them directions in a part of the city that they know better than me; I will learn from them when they tell me about the new course they are studying. How invaluable was it when I had cause to seek a Pakistani friend's counsel to navigate conflict with one of her countrywomen!

At the same time, I will joyfully accept their service of me, recognising it as an honour. I am learning to put up with the discomfort of sitting on the lounge alone while the meal is prepared, not being permitted to help, and then being ushered from the meal table to the lounge leaving the dirty dishes and my host (or her daughter) to clean up on her own. I'll accept gifts & extraordinary hospitality because as my friends seek to honour me even sacrificially, they live with dignity.

Mariam hadn't answered my texts and so I turned up at her house on my way home. She was about to get into the car with her husband to take their son to a doctor's appointment. Despite my protests, she ushered me into the house, made coffee, sat on the lounge with me to talk while her family waited in the car. I drank that coffee quicker than usual! They were only 20 minutes late.

As I visit families with young children and teenagers, I am tempted to buy whatever these young ones might need or even want. I don't want them to be the only kids at school without a pencil case or Pokémon cards or the ones with the obviously second or third hand lunch box. However, the parents' role is to provide for their children and to make the decisions about what they want their children to have. I can support them and answer their questions on what is usual here but for me to swoop in and provide what they can't can easily result in shame and resentment... or dependence. And so, I give gifts at appropriate times (usually birthdays if parents allow) – but limit these gifts so as not to overshadow whatever the parents will provide.

I was given some supermarket vouchers to give to those who might need them. Mariam had recently arrived in Australia and so I offered her one. I will always remember the look on her face as she handed it back to me. "We are not refugees!" she said. I have since learned that in Syria they were from a wealthy family. She has described the marble entry way of their large house. This family has moved several times since being in Australia in search of a 'suitable' home. They appreciate the assistance I can give as they learn English and navigate western bureaucracy but many Muslim families in the diaspora may have been the patron in their own country and now, they find themselves to be clients. Our generosity may actually shame our

friends. Careful observation and asking lots of questions, sensitively, are so important so we can maintain relationships of mutual honour.

Value the Role

I was approached by a member of a South Asian community to bring one of their own into line. “She isn’t listening to us. She is bringing shame on us and her family.” Amira is known in her community as untrustworthy and manipulative. I was astounded that this representative of the community would call me for help. I had no idea what to do but this particular community had given me the role of patron, of leader.

Rather than despise this role of patron that we can feel is thrust upon us we can embrace it for good. As patron an array of God honouring roles open up to us. We become a respected confidant, the keeper of deep secrets and revelations of shame. And it’s into these spaces we can bring the Lord Jesus. In these spaces we are listened to. As Khadijah tearfully told me of her past and present, things that no one else knew, I was humbly aware of what a precious relationship this was. She saw my acceptance and love and was in a place to hear of God’s acceptance and forgiveness in Jesus.

Life in the west is strange. As patron, we have opportunities to mentor women in both how to live here and how to live in the way of Jesus. I’d ordered coffees in a coffee shop with a young Afghan friend and asked the barista how he was. He’d been busy. Fatima asked, “How can you talk to that man like that?” Fatima had just escaped a life of abuse – from uncles, friends, men. I was in a space where I could help her know how to live in this new freedom and understand what a respectful and safe relationship might look like in Australia.

Use the Role to Enter into their Communities

As a patron we can be a visible example of life and faith. As we spend time with women and families, getting to know them, their needs, and abilities, they also will get to know us. We have the opportunity to show that we are trustworthy and honourable women of faith. How important it is to reveal your true self – your faith, your prayerfulness, your devotion to God’s word. Even if this looks different from Muslim devotion it is generally respected, even if an object of curiosity.

And word spreads.

I was visiting Samira and the mother of her daughter’s friend knocked on the door. “This is the friend I told you about.” Samira said. “You must come and visit me too – I can help you with Arabic as well!” came the reply.

I had been supporting a South Asian single mum for some months – visiting her, teaching her English, looking after the baby while she had a shower, introducing her to Jesus. Her community here in Australia had rejected her and would shame her if she ever went to any of their events. Her case worker, a believer from her country, told me “*They talk about you, you know, the South Asian community.*”

I was a bit embarrassed and worried and so asked what she meant.

“They are confused why you, a white Christian Australian woman would spend time with someone like her. But they’ve decided that if you are doing it, they should as well.”

Now, I was unaware anyone knew anything I was doing. I’ve learned that people are always watching, listening, and learning from what we do. May it be an honourable example of God’s loving kindness and mercy in Christ.

Introduce to Believing Communities

As we embrace the role of patron, we can be the gateway into communities of faith. As our friends trust the patron, trust in the patron's community develops. If I am welcomed into their home, so is my friend. Coming to a BBQ or party is OK because I invited them. Here they can see and experience the practical outworking of Jesus' rule in the life of a whole community. Relationship is so highly valued, the potential impact of God honouring relationships is unlimited.

The local mosque has an emergency relief programme for Muslims. However, Samira won't go there. She feels that they show favouritism and are just a source of handouts. That they are Muslim is irrelevant compared to the honourable relationship that now exists between Samira and her Christian friends. This Christian community has exercised patronage in a way that has avoided dependence and condescension.

Hear the words of Amina... *"I know that God loves me because church people love me."*

As patron, we have opportunities to introduce our Muslim friends to God's community who can serve them practically while honouring them as people and introducing them to Jesus.

Beware of Abuse

I met Sophia, a single mum, after she had divorced her abusive husband. She was sad, alone, and initially appreciative of the care and community of the believers she was meeting. She began to ask for help finding a job, learning to drive, buying a car etc. Various of members of our community were able to help her but she would reject anything offered that wasn't exactly what she wanted and complained that no one cared. Occasionally she would offer a meal to visitors, but respect was fleeting and

complaints and gossip about those seeking to support her became common. How would you respond in this situation?

Some things I learned include:

Make the boundaries in the relationship clear. Clearly articulate what I CAN do and what I am prepared to do.

At the same time, let generosity be characteristic of all responses and actions.

Explain how this new country works – a country where there is less (but not zero) reliance on family connections; where social services can be supportive; where employers choose who to employ based (largely) on ability not family or social connections.

Introduce her to the believing community so one person doesn't bear the entire burden of her demands and where she can learn to serve others.

Teach her how to navigate western society & bureaucracy so that she can be more confident and independent but walking with her so she isn't alone.

Where this is not received well, continue to pray for her but don't be drawn into a relationship of dependence and abuse. This may mean contact is lost but we can continue to entrust her into God's loving hands.

The Issue of Money

In a new country, especially among refugees and asylum seekers money is occasionally requested. How should we respond? I have taken much wisdom from the well-read book *When Helping Hurts*.¹¹⁹

In an emergency the question isn't "will I help?" but "where will the help come from?" We have made use of Christian social services; food banks; Christian community or church rather than an individual providing finances.

Some friends from a church in another part of Sydney send me supermarket gift cards from time to time with letters attached, explaining that Jesus' generosity is the reason they are giving. We run a food pantry at a local church in partnership with our denomination's charity. Our Muslim friends come, contributing a small amount for their groceries and enjoy afternoon tea, the community, and a chat while they are waiting for their turn to shop.

Before Covid hit we began some workshops to give new arrivals confidence to fill in forms, go for job interviews etc.

In this way we are acting as brokers – connecting our friends with the Christian community, each other and resources to live confidently in a different culture.

Use the Role to Illustrate the Gospel

One reason why patron-client relationships feel so uncomfortable is that on the surface, they seem to misrepresent the gospel of grace. However, I've realised that patron-client relationships can actually illustrate it. The Bible portrays God as our

¹¹⁹ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2012).

patron who gives us more than we can ever repay, but if this relationship is to continue we must reciprocate with lives of loyalty to him, lives that honour him.¹²⁰

Explaining the Gospel

An understanding of patronage enables us to better understand the gospel and to explain it with concepts our Muslim friends can more easily comprehend.

How would you respond to these questions and statements?

“But sin is just our weakness. Allah knows we are human and make mistakes. He will forgive us because he is merciful. Why would Jesus have to die?”

Using patronage concepts, we can ask...

How ought we treat Almighty God who has made us, gives us life & family and provides all we need?

Can we truly say we have honoured God as he is owed?

We have dishonoured God in so many ways – Would the great provider really just ignore our shame?

Jesus the Messiah is the only man who has shown God complete loyalty & respect & honour. When God commands Jesus the Messiah to take our shame away

¹²⁰ E.g., Romans 6:1-7 We have been raised to a new life in Christ; Romans 6:22 We are now slaves to God. Fuller explanations and illustrations of this are found throughout the epistles e.g. Ephesians 4-6; Philippians 2-4; Colossians 2:20-4:18.

(which means his death) Jesus the Messiah honours God and is obedient. And God continues to honour Jesus. He brought Jesus the Messiah back from the dead and gave him great honour. And so, Jesus has cleansed his followers from shame takes us to God. The honour God gives Jesus the Messiah he also gives to Jesus' followers.

“It’s my father’s anniversary – he died 12 years ago. Now we pray and give to the poor on his behalf every year so his bad deeds are less. Do you do that too?”

When asked this I’ve said ‘No’ because if we look to God to be loyal and to honour him; if we stop being disloyal and living a life that he hates God tells us that he will welcome us to his family.

I tell the story of the Waiting Father (also known as the Two Sons or the Prodigal Son). Jesus the Messiah has paid what we owe to God and he introduces us into God’s family. Our gift to God is not as great as his to us and it never can be. But we keep trusting him and honouring him; telling people about him so they also know how wonderful he is!

“You have life so easy! You just ask for forgiveness and then live how you like. We have rules to obey. Our life is hard.”

We are filled with gratitude and wonder when Jesus the Messiah introduces us into God’s family. God has not only created us but he has adopted us as his own children. We can’t earn our way in. So, once God makes us his child, a part of his family, we uphold the family honour. We don’t live in fear, nor do we do things to earn God’s favour (we are already his children who he loves!). We live to honour God out of gratitude and joy. Child of God is our identity now. And so, we live as a child of God.

Imagine how deep the pain is when we dishonour God our Father! We must ask for forgiveness, remember God's mercy, celebrate his gift of undeserved love and try to copy his character in all we do. In fact, God gives us his Spirit to help us live in ways that honour him, our Heavenly Father.

When we have served people in the Muslim community, we have been asked... "Why do you do this?"

What would you say, using concepts taken from patron-client relationships?

As in the previous answer, we want to communicate that it isn't because we are especially kind people but rather, we belong to Jesus the Messiah who has introduced us into the family of God. And so, we want to honour God, honour Jesus, and live a life like his. Jesus' life was all about serving others, loving others – even if it meant he had to die. God is faithful – he rewards the faithful with life and honour therefore Jesus came back to life. We want to live to love and serve others as Jesus did. Jesus even told a story about this... here, you could tell the story of the Good Samaritan.

Use the Role for Discipleship of New Believers

Believers from a Muslim background may see us as their patron who has introduced them to Jesus and to the community of believers and so may continue to rely on us to assist them in the practical stuff of life in the west (finding a job, house even a husband or wife), as well as to navigate life as a believer. Rather than shrink from this, we have opportunities to become their mentors as they learn to make all of life decisions under the Lordship of Jesus Christ e.g., marriage relationships; conflict resolution; finances and generosity; parenting.

Embracing this role of patron means discipling not just with words but involving our sisters in our lives that they might see how a daughter of God lives and speaks.

What a privilege and responsibility God has given us.

About the Author

In 2008 Anna Shean moved from 14 years in church ministry to community ministry in an area which has the largest and most diverse multicultural populations in Sydney. Here, Anna seeks to make disciples of Jesus from among Muslim communities and equips others to do the same.