

**Exploration of Images of God with  
Believers from Muslim Backgrounds (BMB)  
and the Relevance to Spiritual Direction.**

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The table was spread with inviting, delectable dishes; dancing women clad in festive finery were laughing together while the men warmly greeted one another. This was my welcome to the New Year celebrations of the fellowship group I had recently felt led to become involved with, a group where Christians show hospitality and engage with seekers from Muslim backgrounds around the person of Jesus. On a more normal week we would have table discussions after some presentation of a story from the Bible, sometimes with references to the Qu'ran. In that context I at times heard the mystifying phrase, 'It's the same. We worship the same God.' Mystifying because while I knew I did not have a deep understanding of Islamic beliefs, I had learned enough to be aware of significant variations in the ways my Muslim friends and I described the nature of the God we worshipped. I also sensed their beliefs did not seem to have led to a satisfying heart connection and that their motivation for coming to the group involved a longing beyond social interactions.

With so many from Islamic traditions increasingly arriving on our shores, there is the wider challenge that if I/we wish to express our cultural value of *manaakitanga* (hospitality), spiritual directors would do well to have some understanding of their lived experience of faith. I therefore decided to interview those who now clearly have a relationship with the God of the Bible to learn more about their image of God as a Muslim and how that image has changed by coming to know Jesus. My questions for the six people I individually interviewed informed the conversation<sup>1</sup> while I listened to the stories of their journeys, being attentive for 'the flecks and nuggets of gold.'<sup>2</sup> Testimonies on YouTube, books by those who have come to know Jesus, and books and articles by folk who have a long history of interacting with Muslims, have also been consulted. Although this is very much an introductory exploration, I found it personally impacting; my hope is that when seekers and believers from Muslim backgrounds (BMBs) open their hearts to some form of accompaniment I/we will do so with increased wisdom and sensitivity.

'Allah' is the name given to the creator God in the Qu'ran and used by Muslims around the world. Although Muslims do not have exclusive use of the term 'Allah,' meaning 'the God' – it is also used by many Indonesian and Middle Eastern Christians to refer to the God of the Bible – I will largely use the word 'Allah' when talking about the God revealed in the Qu'ran and the Hadith, and 'God' for the God of the Jewish and Christian Bible. Many of those I

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<sup>1</sup> The questions are listed in Appendix 1.

<sup>2</sup> Janet Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings*, p. 57, uses this term to refer to the 'experiences of grace and the Spirit.'

interviewed wished to clearly differentiate their images of God gained from the different traditions: Allah had been portrayed as a God who is pure will, whose highest value is not love<sup>3</sup> and consequently for those I interviewed it was hard to know or to trust this God. To protect their privacy, I refer to my interviewees as A, B, C, D, E, or F.

Those I have interviewed come from a Middle Eastern, non-Arabic speaking country ruled by Shiite religious leaders. They are generally well-educated, and from affluent backgrounds. Some were from religious homes where they received regular instruction in the mosque, and others had more liberal parents who passed on their own understanding of God, or even their atheism. As none of those I spoke to understood Arabic, even when they had learned to recite the Qu'ran it was not accompanied with understanding. Their images of God were largely 'imbibed' from the cultural milieu, with school teachers and religious leaders having a big effect. Most of them had a high degree of antipathy to these authority figures. As with Christians, there is a vast range in what Muslims profess, believe, and experience<sup>4</sup> of the One they serve. My interviewees are not to be taken as representative of all Muslims. They do provide a cross-section from their country: their ages range from thirty to seventy, five female and two males. It is possible that their newfound faith in Christ leads them to offer insights that commitment and loyalty may prevent others from voicing.

So, who is Allah to my interviewees? There was not a lot of variance in their responses.

'Apart from the Incarnation and the Trinity, it is possible to know that God is, but not who God is.'<sup>5</sup> Islam strongly asserts that Allah is transcendent, intentionally keeping himself removed from humankind and that he is *tawhid* or indivisibly one, and not inherently relational.<sup>6</sup> For my interviewees, fear came into this gulf. When asked 'What is Allah like?' usually the immediate response was that Allah is a God you are afraid of. Some of their understandings that contributed to this:

- Allah's will is supreme and is effected through every circumstance and every decision that is made. Islam means submission and a Muslim is one who submits to Allah's will, regardless of the outcome, or whether experiencing good or bad in this life.
- Allah's judging eye was present at all times, aware of every thought and action, every complaint, every hint of disobedience to his commands. When he perceived a falling

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<sup>3</sup> Brad Jersak, *A More Christlike God*, chapter 2, has a helpful exploration of the distinction.

<sup>4</sup> Sufis in particular have a different experience.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy George, *Christianity Today*, Feb 2002, quoted in *More Than a Prophet*.

<sup>6</sup> Qureshi, *No God but One*, ch 6.

short, angry punishment followed. 'He can beat you, make you mental, turn you into a stone.'<sup>7</sup>

- F was especially impacted by descriptions of what would come to the undeserving one after death. Her fear led to a lot of over-thinking: saying what she knew she should be saying e.g. 'Allah is kind', but living with fear in her heart.
- The lack of a personal relationship meant that my interviewees had no knowledge or experience of being deeply loved, but rather uncertainty and a strong sense that if Allah was to favour them it would be conditional on their behaviour.
- F likened it to a 'trading relationship.' You sought to meet the obligations taught, and if good things happened it meant you were successful; difficulties were understood as a consequence of something you had done. The feeling that Allah was far away and unreachable was constant.
- While Allah was 'unreachable', 'huge' and 'angry', B was taught that the religious leaders could communicate with Allah and speak on his behalf. However they demanded allegiance and an outward conforming to practices. Their credibility was tarnished when B saw their 'lying and cheating.' Hypocrisy and lack of authenticity became important issues for many of them.
- There were a lot of decrees dictating the minutiae of existence, including suitable dress and piety for women, along with a strong sense that the approval of Allah was contingent on the execution of these practices, and more. This added up to a felt high level of requirements and a low expectation of being able to meet these.
- Because Allah is so different from us, it is not appropriate to even talk about Allah 'feeling,' or knowing him in a relational way. The relationship is that of master and servant, not father and sons or daughters. 'Allah is not a person to be known but a will to be followed.'<sup>8</sup>

Many resisted the motif of unjust requirements and punishment. D rebelled, since he figured if he was to be harshly punished for a little, he may as well properly transgress. C decided that as she considered herself to be more just than Allah, she would dispute his punishments when she met him and he would not have an answer. The perceived inherent sexism in the marriage and inheritance laws was an issue for her. In the Hadith, Mohammed is said to have noted that the majority of the inhabitants of hell were women, sent there mainly for their lack of appreciation towards their husbands.<sup>9</sup> For C Allah was the unrighteous judge.

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<sup>7</sup> Person D

<sup>8</sup> Abdu Murray, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qlxk9V5OMc?>

<sup>9</sup> Power, *Challenging Islamic Traditions*, p186

While many of them rejected Allah as God, they were aware of a longing and a search for the true God that they intuitively knew was there. Three of them spoke of being given a Bible along their journey, but that when they detected anything that was reminiscent of Allah, such as Old Testament accounts of violent judgements on sin or that God is jealous, they cast it aside.

*I always felt God was close and I was trying to work out what he wants. I didn't know his name – but I didn't call him Allah. But now I know Jesus is the one and he talks to me and I know his name. Jesus is lovely.*

*I often called out to God that I wanted to know him – 'I know you are not Allah but I don't know about other gods.' I always had a hunger to know God. 'Where are you? If you created me I want to see you. I want to talk to you. You have enough power to show me yourself.'*

In their searchings, some reached out to the spirit world, engaging in playing Ouija board or reading coffee cup remains. Officially condemned, folk Islam varies according to the cultural context<sup>10</sup> as a way to deal with various fears such as their enemies casting spells on them or the power of jealousy referred to as the 'evil eye.'<sup>11</sup> For some, there was an experienced increase of spiritual opposition as they came nearer to Jesus. C spoke of hearing footsteps in her house, sensing a hand on her head, and being taken up and spun around. For others there were significant dreams, a common occurrence in the Islamic world, and to which they attribute great significance.

Although their longing for connection was felt to be unmet in their inherited faith, each one had a different story of God at work in their lives, drawing them in through a variety of ways: some amazing answer to prayer; being challenged by the transformation in someone near who had put their trust in Jesus; the care, support and prayer from believers; feeling envious of the intimacy they saw in a worship service. These are their voices:

*A: We need to know God, know his ways. He is a God of mercy, of love. Islam had many strict rules to obey but Jesus sets us free. The Spirit of Christ is with us.*

*B: If you find the right way you receive peace. That's the peace you never have – that is what is missing....When someone asked me, 'How do you know it's from God?' I said, 'It's because of the peace I feel. And I feel satisfied.*

*C: Knowing God is fabulous...In Islam God is unknowable, and there is no relationship. The Lord makes his thoughts available even when we haven't prayed.*

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<sup>10</sup> Folk Islam, webzine whenwomenspeak.net

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

*He is too lovely, what a wonderful God! ...The Lord's ways are so yummy, so tangible, so close... He is better than having a person right there – he answers and has no limitations. God gives a gentle knock on our heart's door when we have displeased him. It's an extraordinary life, simple...just incredible with the Lord. When folk run away from God, God stands with arms open, waiting for them to come home.*

*D: Jesus always loves, forgives, says 'Come to me, I'm a good father, I understand you.' I feel comfortable with the God of the Bible. Even when I read the Old Testament, I feel comfortable with Jehovah. He is not hard like Allah – he listens to me. I've experienced many miracles...Help often comes from unexpected sources. God feels very close... At first it was difficult to forgive others. In Islam they teach us to fight back. But I learned and learned. It's now easy to forgive because I understand evil is at work. When I make a mistake I pray to Jesus because I know he will forgive me.*

*E: The important thing is that Jesus came to me. He continually tells me, 'I am here. I am here.' Then how can you go to another religion? I don't feel connected... No other one has come after me."*

For each one there has been a costly investment of time and love in their lives by others, building a foundation of prayer and study of the Bible. To continue growth in relational intimacy with God there is a place for spiritual direction, the practice of 'helping others attend to God's presence and revelation and prepare to respond to him.'<sup>12</sup> Being mindful of the particular experience and needs of BMBs who are relatively new to this land can grace this accompanying.

First some general cultural implications:

- Seek to understand where they are coming from through invitation to tell their story,<sup>13</sup> including their history, geography, family background, their journey to get to NZ. In this way we offer hospitality to the whole person and embrace their otherness.
- Learn about the context of their daily lives. Many new immigrants or refugees have issues with finding work, and may lack social networks. Conversely they may have developed strong connections with others from the same geographical or faith community which have implications on their decision-making.

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<sup>12</sup> Benner, *Sacred Companions*, p 105

<sup>13</sup> Guenther, *Holy Listening*, p 32: 'For me spiritual direction is always story telling.'

- As they have left the international community of Islam or ‘ummah’, BMBs often long for a richer community as part of the family of God than a few hours on Sunday. Where that is missing, we may need to empathise with disappointments or a sense of abandonment by a local church which seems too busy to truly show care. This is a challenge for Westerners to be discerning of the areas in our individualistic culture that we are accustomed to that may not be in line with kingdom values. Many are attracted to the congruence of Jesus – what he taught and lived lined up.
- Establish relationships of equality and avoid the temptation to see oneself as the expert. This is especially important for those who have been trained by authoritarian leaders, and especially for women who have had a sense of subjugation. ‘As a form of Christian ministry, spiritual direction must be based on [the] model of the discipleship of equals, on the worth of all persons and the gift of the Spirit to all.’<sup>14</sup> Fischer recommends that in building a cooperative and reciprocal relationship the spiritual director is the ‘resource’ in introducing the other to primary spiritual resources but not the ‘authority,’ rather the director is there to connect and nurture. The ones I spoke to were sensitive to hypocrisy but very responsive to genuine care: they notice when others are moved by their pain and struggles. ‘We must let ourselves be touched.’<sup>15</sup>
- Understand that words may have different connotations and don’t assume a shared understanding of terms. For example, even though the ‘nearness’ of Allah is referred to: he is ‘closer than your jugular vein,’<sup>16</sup> and ‘Allah stands between a man and his heart,’<sup>17</sup> the context of these verses referring to closeness is judgement even of thoughts, not love, grace and mercy.<sup>18</sup> Ida Glasser highlights the difference between descriptions of Allah being ‘near and everywhere’ and the Biblical revelation that God in love becomes Emmanuel and lives amongst us.<sup>19</sup>

Once the person is aware of a desire to come closer to God, we need to be sensitive to the opportunities to arrange their lives for further spiritual transformation. I will comment on Ruth

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<sup>14</sup> Fischer, *Women at the Well*, p 19

<sup>15</sup> Guenter, p 31

<sup>16</sup> Q. 50:16

<sup>17</sup> Q.8:24

<sup>18</sup> Power, *Engaging Islamic Traditions*, ch 8. Chapter 9, ‘Challenging Islamic Traditions’ is also informative around the use of common words.

<sup>19</sup> Glasser, *The Presence of God*.

Hayley Barton's list of aspects of this mystery of transformation<sup>20</sup> in relation to my interviewees:

1. **Longing for more:** Each one of those interviewed spoke of a longing to know God in the way modelled by others, and to have this same God transform them. In contrast to the passivity associated with Allah determining all things, we can purposefully focus on what invitations God may be stirring in our directees.

2. **Solitude:** Spurred on by their inner yearning my interviewees would be able to resonate with the words of Pope Shenouda III:

*Sit alone, consider and meditate, go deep into yourself and seek God. You will find him there, in your inmost depths. You will see Him face to face and feel Him as a pouring and overflowing fount of love.*<sup>21</sup>

However this also requires intentionality.

3. **Scripture:** For many of my interviewees this has been a formative well of life. Some reflections:

- In contrast to their earlier emphasis on memorization and recitation, reading for relationship and revelation through such approaches as lectio divina brings riches.
- The Psalms are a resource for expression of the heart, and growth in the surprising understanding that both praise and lament are welcomed.
- Encourage feeding on and soaking in the scriptures that reveal the God who comes to us<sup>22</sup>, who seeks us out when we are 'lost'<sup>23</sup>; the God who is generous to the undeserving<sup>24</sup> ; the one who shows compassion to vulnerable women e.g. Hagar<sup>25</sup>, the woman at the well<sup>26</sup>, the woman caught in adultery<sup>27</sup>, the woman with the issue of blood<sup>28</sup>, Ruth;<sup>29</sup> and is full of forgiveness, purity and unconditional love.

4. **Prayer:** Finding the heart's true home.

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<sup>20</sup> Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*

<sup>21</sup> Shenouda, *The Release of the Spirit*, p92 quoted in *Engaging Islamic Traditions*, p119

<sup>22</sup> Rev 3:20

<sup>23</sup> Luke 15

<sup>24</sup> Matt 20:1-16

<sup>25</sup> Gen 16, 21

<sup>26</sup> John 4: 1-42

<sup>27</sup> John 8: 1-11

<sup>28</sup> Luke 8:43-48

<sup>29</sup> Fischer, *Women at the Well*, ch 5 is a rich resource here.

- When F was invited to pray to God as a kind father, she found the connection she sought. As attachment to God grows through meditation on who God is,<sup>30</sup> prayer of the heart has flowed. This needs intentional nurturing and exploring.
- For those who are used to set prayers it may be helpful to offer written prayers available to use when words are hard to find.

#### 5. **Body:** Not to be neglected or ignored

- Is there an invitation here, to learn to honour the body as 'a place where God makes his presence known,'<sup>31</sup> through caring for it, listening to it and praying with it? Is there revelation of the indwelling presence and glory of God?
- Be aware that the great cultural changes here in NZ can cause a deep unsettledness in every area of life. Separated from the constraints of bringing shame on their family, the sexual 'freedom' of the West can be confusing and enticing.

#### 6. **Self-examination:** Bringing the whole self before God

- Welcome emotions. Two people commented that what they love about Jesus is that they can talk freely with him, fight when necessary, cry. F was excited to share that she must deeply know that God was kind and accepting of her because she had dared to express anger and complaint.
- This includes awareness of unwanted emotions such as lingering fear or doubts which would previously have been identified as blasphemy. Self-awareness is safe because they know the one who is for them and forgives freely.

#### 7. **Discernment** – recognising and responding to the presence of God.

- The covenantal relationship with the God who works to bring good not harm invites a relinquishing of the need to control, and practices used to manipulate spiritual forces. Responses to a naïve enquiry about these practices may take time to open up as there is often a concern they will be mocked or not understood.<sup>32</sup>
- Learning to 'find God in all things in order that we might love and serve God in all'<sup>33</sup> is to be encouraged as a reflective practice growing intimacy, and familiarity with God's voice.

#### 8. **Sabbath** – establishing rhythms of work and rest

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<sup>30</sup> Aronis, *Developing Intimacy with God*, p 60-64

<sup>31</sup> Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, p 83

<sup>32</sup> Folk Islam webzine

<sup>33</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, quoted by Barton, p 111

- This is a time to intentionally focus on life-giving connection with God joyfully knowing that we are included in the dance of the trinity<sup>34</sup>, to celebrate heart connection with others and refreshing rest.
- While for some of those I interviewed this comes naturally, for others this will probably be a growing area as they juggle shift work or the demands of new jobs plus growing families, along with security concerns of being a BMB, even in a Western land.

One other closing thought: can we be comfortable with their zealously? There are many testimonies on YouTube of those for whom the decision to be baptised has been an extremely costly one, but they did so considering that Jesus was worth losing everything that had been precious. Whether radical or quietly prayerful, all those I talked with expressed a compassionate desire to share with other Muslim friends. 'When I am more established I believe that will be my purpose.'<sup>35</sup> Deeply impacted by her 81-year-old father declaring as he lay dying, 'I don't know where I came from or where I am going, and I don't know love,' C developed a passion to see her family come to faith. Many spoke of how the changes in their lives have challenged and attracted family members – the power of a transformed life.

It is my hope as more BMBs are established in the body of Christ, they will understand the process of and feel invited to spiritual direction. In the meantime, the invitation of the Spirit may be to extend hospitality of the heart around the table or a doctor's waiting room, listening and celebrating with them as they navigate the journey from fear of punishment to intimacy with the compassionate One who is three.

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<sup>34</sup> John 14:20

<sup>35</sup> Person F

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## Online Resources:

<https://whenwomenspeak.net/>

- "The Presence of God" When Women Speak... May 2017

<https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/the-presence-of-god/>

- “The Nearness of God – Muslim Women’s Perspective and Response” When Women Speak... May 2018 <https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/the-nearness-of-god-muslim-womens-perspective-1>

<https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/the-nearness-of-god-muslim-womens-perspective-a-response-2/>

- “How do Muslim Women do Theodicy?” When Women Speak... Feb 2017  
<https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/how-do-muslim-women-do-theodicy/>

- Is the God of Islam the same as the God of the Bible, a talk by a former Muslim  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qlxk9V5OMc?>

## Appendix 1

My questions:

- As a Muslim how did you feel or think about Allah?
- What expectations did you have regarding a personal relationship with Allah?
- If any, how did you experience that?
- Was there anything that communicated to you that Allah was pleased with you?
- What motivated you to get to know Jesus?
- What has changed for you as you have come to know Jesus and the God of the Bible? Personally, socially, spiritual practices?
- How has your image of God changed?
- How does God communicate with you? How do you sense God feels about you?
- What is most important to you now? Have your values changed? How is your life different?
- What is the most challenging aspect of believing in Jesus?