

Can a Muslim Be a Follower of Christ?



The Arresting Story of a Devout Believer

by Paul-Gordon Chandler

Excerpted from the book, Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road by Paul-Gordon Chandler

Family Honor Is Shaken

If you are not going to cease being a Christian, then go and at least be a good Christian,” Mazhar’s uncle exhorted him. Amazingly, this was only three days after that same uncle had attempted to take Mazhar’s life by slitting open his throat in public with a large knife.

When Mazhar initially returned to his hometown after having been expelled from the military, his family and his local community were both shocked and wonderfully pleased at the dramatic change in his life. He had left them as an irresponsible drunkard, and returned a completely different person. Instead of being aloof and isolating himself from others, he aggressively sought out ways to help them—even to the point of volunteering to cut the nails and wash the feet of his elderly uncle (something seen in that society as a lowly task, and therefore culturally considered a very honorable thing of someone of Mazhar’s status to do). A few years later, Ahmed Swayden, a well-known Muslim writer from his hometown, wrote the introduction to Mazhar’s first novel, *The Traveler*, which focuses on the transformation Christ can bring to a person, and in it Swayden described the tremendous difference he observed in Mazhar after his decision to follow Christ.

Though Mazhar’s family was overcome with joy at the change they observed in him, it was Mazhar’s insistence that it was all because he had become a “Christian” that caused them deep grief. Not understanding anything about his new faith in Christ, they felt as if their son or brother was

rejecting them and all they believed in, loved, and stood for—culturally, socially, and spiritually. Also, they had secretly continued to hope that Mazhar would still someday become a Muslim cleric, and that was now an impossible dream. The only followers of Christ that Mazhar had met so far were Arab Protestant Christians, and therefore he naturally assumed, knowing of no other possible identity at the time, that following Christ made him “a Christian.” However, the term “Christian” is a term loaded with negative associations in the Muslim context, due, as we have seen, to the atrocities of the medieval Crusades, to the Church’s link with Western colonialism, to the values of the “Christian” West, and to perceived lifestyles of many of the historic Arab Christians. Albeit with good intentions, having been influenced by the beliefs of the few Arab Christians he knew, but really with very little understanding of his own new “Christian” faith, Mazhar even went to the local mosque and shared with them his view that they were worshipping the wrong God. Understandably this provoked a strong reaction from both his family and the local Islamic community, and led to his being completely rejected by them. With their long history and rich culture, Syrians are a very proud people. Maintaining one’s honor and avoiding shame at any cost, while important all over the Arab world, is especially so in Syria. Consequently, shortly after this, his uncle attempted to murder Mazhar directly in front of the local mosque for having shamed his family. A scar on Mazhar’s neck still testifies to this attack. The attempted “honor killing” was a deliberate act to publicly clear his family’s name in the community, thereby removing their shame. However, as the murder was not successful, Mazhar today believes that perhaps it was attempted with the intention of only appearing to be a murder. Mazhar was rushed to the hospital, unconscious. Upon his release three days later, he went to see the uncle who had tried to take his life. Mazhar told him how much he still loved him.

Paul-Gordon Chandler is a U.S. Episcopal priest serving in the Middle East. He grew up in Muslim West Africa and has lived and worked extensively throughout the Islamic world with churches, Christian publishing, and relief and development agencies. He is the author of God’s Global Mosaic. He can be reached via www.paulgordonchandler.com.



It was then that the uncle, amazed at Mazhar's response, gave him his blessing and told him in that case to "go and be a good Christian," as opposed to the morally, religiously, and socially bad perception his community had of Christians otherwise, particularly those involved in what Muslims considered disreputable occupations—the selling of alcohol and prostitution.

Undeterred in his quest for a "Christian" identity, which is what local Christians were putting pressure on him to undertake, he tried to officially change his religion. However, in Syria, as in most Muslim countries, it is illegal for Muslims to convert to Christianity or otherwise change their religious identity. Even today, having been a follower of Christ for over thirty years, Mazhar is still registered as a Muslim, as are his Christian wife and their two children. When Mazhar submitted an application to the court in his province to change his religious identity, he was promptly called in by the provincial governor. The governor, who was from a traditional Muslim family, was very kind and listened to Mazhar's faith journey. He was so taken by the radical transformation that had resulted in Mazhar that he said to him, "I wish I had more time to listen to you, as I do want to know what really happened in your life. I don't know much about Islam, and I am not trying to make you return to it. Maybe I could walk with you in your journey. I would like to learn more. Do you have something I could read?" Nevertheless, knowing how delicate and sensitive of a situation Mazhar's desire to change his religious identity would be, the local governor advised him that it would not be possible, and strongly encouraged Mazhar to leave Syria, believing "any idiot could now kill you without having to have a reason." Mazhar sent him a New Testament not long after, and a few years later, when his first novel was published, sent him that as well.

Mazhar's decision to follow Christ was a revolutionary event in that small and completely Muslim town. Naturally the talk of the entire community, it still intrigues those living there. Over thirty years later, when Mazhar returned to live in Syria for a short time, an old acquaintance whom he had not seen all those years recognized him, and came over to welcome him. Immediately after the greetings, he asked, "So are you still following Christ?" Another occurrence, albeit a humorous one, illustrates the long-term impact Mazhar's actions had on the entire community. More than thirty-five years after leaving Syria, while at the Tunis Book Fair in Tunisia, North Africa, Mazhar ran into a distant relative who did not recognize him. Immediately this relative began to recount the tragedy the Mallouhi family had suffered many

years ago with "this person who brought shame on them all by becoming a Christian." Mazhar led the man on for a while, suggesting they get rid of him once and for all. The relative responded by saying, "He must have 'connections,' as he is one of the most public followers of Christ in the Arab World today and his books are everywhere, and he somehow doesn't seem to be afraid." Eventually Mazhar showed his relative the scar on his neck and with a smile asked him, "My uncle began here, do you want to finish it?" Until fairly recently, Mazhar was the only known person in his hometown of thirty thousand to have become a follower of Christ. However, the number of those in Mazhar's greater family following Christ today is slowly increasing—not officially as Christians, but instead in the manner Mazhar himself chooses: following Christ within their Islamic culture.

From Muslim to Christian to Muslim Disciple of Christ

Mazhar believes the core issue is that we all too often confuse spiritual identity with cultural identity. Within the complexity of this cultural and religious tension, Mazhar and his life experience teaches us a great deal about how someone from a Muslim background may follow Christ without having to leave his Arab and Islamic culture and community. He is an example of someone who has kept his Islamic culture and Christ as his Lord, presenting us a distinctive example of a Muslim following Christ remaining culturally fully "Arab" and not dislocated from his "birth" culture.

As both a committed follower of Christ for four decades and also an insider in Islamic circles, Mazhar's approach is not one of radical discontinuity from his Islamic Arab culture. Mazhar, who calls himself a "Muslim follower of Christ," says, "Islam is my heritage. Christ is my inheritance." As it is almost impossible to separate Islam and Arab culture, he is therefore instinctively Muslim. Yet as he is also at the same time a follower of Christ, he challenges our religious and cultural presuppositions.

Living within the clash of cultures and beliefs and having had to negotiate between identities all his life, he provides an example that Muslims who desire to follow Christ need in order to visualize how they too can retain their cultural identity.

Mazhar's spiritual journey has taken him from being completely dislocated from his community to once again becoming very much an insider in Islamic society. Having grown up in a conservative Muslim family that planned on his becoming a Muslim cleric, he initially left his Arab Islamic culture and

society to enter a “Christian community” in order to follow Christ, only to begin a slow, but steady, return journey to his Arab and Islamic roots, all while maintaining his loyalty to Christ.

When Mazhar became a follower of Christ, Arab Christians told him that he needed to leave his cultural past behind, so he dislocated himself from his Islamic culture (family, community, etc.) and attempted to take on a “Christian culture.” They encouraged him to change his name (to take a “Christian” name), to stop socializing in cafés (the primary meeting place for Arab Muslim men), to stop attending his family’s religious celebrations, to keep his distance from mosques and Muslims, to cease fasting, to pray in a different posture (not bowing or prostrate), to use “Christian” as opposed to Islamic Arabic greetings and words when speaking (such as “good morning” instead of “peace be upon you”), and even to eat pork to prove he was converted.

Desperate not to be alone, as in Islamic society people who are alone are suspected of being mentally ill, Mazhar aggressively adopted a Christian culture and ended all relationships with Muslims. He became a “churchian” because that was the only option presented to him. Desiring to be accepted in his “new family and community,” he even went to extremes in order to please them. The local Christians tried to put upon him all their traditions and views, such as inspiring him toward hating Islam, encouraging him to denigrate his own religious and cultural background, and even to embody Zionism, praying for the success of the new State of Israel (something completely contrary to Arab society). Furthermore, he was encouraged by the local Christians to emigrate to the West, or to a country like Brazil, where he could be free to be a “Christian.”

Uncomfortable with the way he was being indoctrinated, Mazhar faced a deep internal struggle. He knew that not to be a “Christian” culturally would be tantamount to denying Christ to the Christian community that had taken him in. Yet, ironically, no matter what he did, due to having come from a Muslim background, he still was not fully accepted by the local Christian community as one of them. This explains why, for many years, he found himself still having a deep craving for respect and friendship from Western Christians.

As Mazhar quickly became alienated from his family and all his former friends, he faced a profound crisis of identity. He was on the road toward destruction—spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically. This is sadly the case for many followers of Christ from Muslim backgrounds who have become culturally “Christian” and therefore dislocated from their own communities. Mazhar recalls a friend who had a

similar background and experience. He ended up so indoctrinated by Christians against his Islamic past that he became irrationally paranoid about Islam and mentally unstable.

Many Christ followers from Muslim backgrounds struggle the rest of their lives, never fully fitting into a Christian culture. Consequently, they regretfully end up following Christ in lonely places. In 1991, when Mazhar was required to leave Egypt, one such young man wrote him, “I looked at you as a son looks to his father. The day you left I ... lost a father. ... I am not exaggerating to tell you I became like a dirty sick donkey everyone avoids being near. ... My fellowship is limited to myself, my wife and my little daughter.”

In explaining the challenge followers of Christ from Muslim backgrounds face and the damage it causes to their persons, Mazhar shares a short story about a turtle and an eagle. Once there was a turtle who asked an eagle to teach her how to fly. The eagle at first refused, but after repeatedly being asked by the turtle, the eagle took the turtle between his claws and carried the turtle up and then left her to fall. The turtle of course fell and broke her shell. Just like the turtle, Muslim followers of Christ are led to believe they can fly like the eagle, and yet in attempting to do so they end up seriously wounded and scarred.

When Muslim followers of Christ leave their cultures to become “Christians,” they can often end up in an even worse faith condition. Mazhar loves to tell the well-known Arab parable about how crows came to waddle when they walk. One day the crow became jealous of the hud-hud bird (a bird in the Middle East that walks with a dignified strut). The crow therefore tried to imitate him. However, the crow was unsuccessful and as a result lost the ability to walk correctly, thereby being stuck with a waddle forever.

Regardless of how much Mazhar assimilated himself into a “Christian” culture and appeared to be Christian, he never felt truly at home. He often found himself feeling he was betraying his heritage and people. Even years later, while attending the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., during the time of the Gulf War in 1991, he felt himself to be a “traitor” to his culture and people by just being present, as the West had become so anti-Arab and anti-Islam. It put him into a state of delirium.

Mazhar’s struggle of identity continued for many years. He recalls being deeply influenced in this area by the writings of E. Stanley Jones, the Methodist minister who served in India in the first half of the twentieth century. Jones loved the Hindu and Muslim cultures in which he found himself, and respected them, demonstrating a spirit of humility.



In Jones, Mazhar sensed a kindred spirit. To this day Jones is still one of the few authors he has read in the English language.

Over the years, Mazhar slowly realized that following Christ does not require him to be against his own self, but rather that following Christ is all about enhancing and fulfilling his true identity. Reflecting today on his experience, Mazhar tells the parable of the Middle Eastern donkey who wanted to be a lion. The donkey tried to be one by dressing like a lion, walking like a lion, talking (roaring) like a lion, and eating like a lion. However, in the end, he was eaten by a lion. The point, of course, is that changing one's outside appearance does not actually change the essence of who and what one is. For example, Mazhar's official identity papers still list him as a Muslim, as the Syrian government does not allow a change in one's religious identity.

After a long and arduous journey, Mazhar rediscovered his roots, albeit returning to them in a fresh way. It was a process of gradually beginning to see and call himself "culturally" a Muslim and "spiritually" a Christ follower. He realized that following Christ does not mean denying his loyalty to Middle Eastern culture and becoming part of an alien "Christian" culture. Though he follows Christ, he now deeply embraces his Middle Eastern, and even his Islamic, roots. Tunisian Muslim writer Jalel El Mokh describes Mazhar as "someone with Christian faith that is culturally Islamic."

Today Mazhar is very proud of his heritage and identifies himself as a Muslim according to his family, people, and culture, and enjoys breathing that air. Yet he also openly shares that he loves and follows Christ. He enjoys praying and meditating in the quiet reverent atmosphere of a mosque, where he sits on the carpeted floor and reads his Bible and loves to talk with people about his and their faith. While there, he often visits the sheiks and imams, who are his friends. He has kept a lot of the Muslim practices, from

using "Muslim" greetings and prayers, to fingering his Islamic prayer beads, to reciting the character of God (or meditating on sections of the Scriptures, such as the Psalms, particularly phrases like "the Lord is my shepherd"), to spending a lot of time in Arab cafés. Interestingly, cafés in the Arab world are often exclusively the milieu of Muslims. (In Egypt, Mazhar recalls an Egyptian Christian declining Mazhar's invitation to go sit in a café, saying, "If someone in my church sees me, they will kick me out of the church." This shows the divide in religious cultural practices.) He leads most of his studies of the Gospels with others in the Arab cafés or in mosques. Mazhar, after all these years of following Christ, still feels the pull of the culture when he hears the call to prayer or the Qur'an melodiously chanted.

Some Westerners might incorrectly assume that Mazhar's return to being an insider in Islamic circles is a means of becoming contextualized to more effectively share his faith in Christ with his fellow Muslim brothers and sisters. Yet for him it is not a means to an end, but rather a "coming to rest in his true identity" discovering who he really is, a finding of his way home.^f

HAVE YOU DISCOVERED THE IBMR?

Now with 3 convenient formats:

PRINT / PDF / HTML

- \$23.⁰⁰ one year, print edition
- \$9.⁹⁷ one year, e-journal edition
- Free one year, e-journal for students*

When you subscribe today to the 56-page print edition—for \$23 including postage worldwide—you will receive 4 issues a year by mail AND immediate access to the e-journal's PDF and HTML formats. The e-journal edition alone is available for \$9.97 a year.

*Full-time, current students may receive 4 issues of the e-journal free. See www.InternationalBulletin.org/studentoffer.html.

International Bulletin
Missionaries as Heroes and Villains

On This Page

- 01 Mission and Ethics
- 02 Mission in History
- 03 David A. Ross 1945-2008
- 04 The Challenge of Women's Ministry
- 05 History of Missionary Work in the Pacific
- 06 The Legacy of David A. Ross
- 07 Theology
- 08 The Legacy of Missionary Work
- 09 Book Reviews
- 10 Book News

of Missionary Research

INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN OF MISSIONARY RESEARCH

To use a major credit card, visit
www.InternationalBulletin.org

You may subscribe online, call customer service at (203) 624-6672, ext. 309, or mail a check payable in U.S. funds to IBMR, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834.

Published quarterly by the
Overseas Ministries Study Center

200811