

Deep Knowledge

Understanding a Popular Muslim Worldview

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Missiologists combine field experience with academic research to uncover world-view assumptions outside the range of Western experience. Drawing on research from her dissertation, Cynthia Strong details several important worldview assumptions from a Southeast Asian Muslim worldview and then suggests how Christian truths can be explained to Muslim women in light of their central beliefs.

One of the greatest challenges we face is making Christianity relevant and meaningful to people whose worldviews differ from our own. Nowhere is this more evident than when we attempt to work with people who practice what Westerners call “popular” or “folk” Islam. Not only are we confused by the seemingly illogical ideas behind these beliefs and practices but we are amazed at how casually they are juxtaposed with more “orthodox” traditions in day to day life. A woman, for example, may place a bolo knife or other metal object next to her baby to protect it from evil spirits while she leaves the room for prayers. A man may use a simple divining method to determine which path to take from his house to the mosque. At the mosque, women in modest *hijab* may collect spittle from men exiting the mosque to treat their sick, believing it to be empowered with *barakah* or blessing from their recitation of the Arabic Qur’an. How are we to understand these beliefs? Are they examples of formal and informal religion or do they represent different cognitive abilities—the educated knowing the meaning of the religion while the uneducated are preoccupied with superstitions and myths? Do they imply the failure of religious specialists—the *imams* or prayer leaders and the *ulamas* or judges—to clearly define and enforce theological truth? Or are Muslim assumptions about the world and how it interrelates simply different from Western assumptions? Most importantly, if the reality assumed by so many Muslims is different from our own, how do we address the problem?

In this article, I will share several insights into popular Islam from my study of Yakan Filipinos, a Muslim tribal group in the southern Philippines. In particular, I will discuss the concept of coherentism—how people justify their beliefs by means of coherence—and how it may affect our presentation of the gospel. Simply put, coherentism refers to the way that beliefs are linked together within a worldview. The most important beliefs, Robert Audi says, do not stand alone but are “woven into the whole fabric” of a society (1988:158). They make sense because they fit or “cohere” with many other aspects of the culture. To have a relevant witness, then, coherentism suggests a Christian must explore the local worldview and present the gospel with as much reference to the entire belief system as possible in order for it to be understood and accepted.

Most Christian workers, admittedly are already aware they need a relevant message: missionaries have been discussing relevance in terms of contextualization and felt needs for decades. What we may not realize is the degree to which we still continue to present Christ in our own worldview terms and the limitless ways the gospel can cohere with beliefs in other worldviews that we have yet to consider:

THE YAKAN FILIPINO WORLDVIEW

To illustrate, let us consider some aspects of Yakan Filipino worldview. Between 1990 and 1994, I conducted intermittent ethnographic research among Yakan Muslim women on Basilan Island. My fieldwork was only a few days old when I discovered that Yakan women do not personally understand many aspects of their own religion. Repeatedly when I asked them how they would treat disease, deal with specific problems or interpret spiritual phenomenon, they simply replied, “you go to the one who knows.” A personal knowledge of these things, indeed, would imply that the person was a bona fide religious practitioner—an *imam* (prayer leader), *tabib* (herbal doctor and spirit specialist) or *lendungan* (shaman) with expert knowledge, often as a result of their personal relationship with spirits.

After obtaining several life history studies from local Yakan women, I began to search for clues to Yakan religious knowledge through a study of their rituals, sacred stories and collective behaviors. Studies in the *Shari‘ah* law and *Shafi‘i* jurisprudence, along with Malay beliefs and rituals, rounded out my study.

I discovered that the Islam brought to Southeast Asia by Sufi traders and mystics in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had a remarkable coherence with the Yakan’s indigenous Malay beliefs. The Islam of many Middle Eastern Muslims, in contrast, especially those who follow a more legalistic form of the faith, does not have the same coherence. Succinctly said, law-based Middle- Eastern Islam lacks the coherence that medieval Sufi Islam had with many Southeast Asian beliefs. When Southeast Asian Sufi Muslims encountered fundamentalist Muslims in Indonesia in the 1960s, many of them turned to Christ, preferring the Christianity being presented with power by Dutch missionaries to the letter of the *Shari‘ah* law. If the gospel can be presented to the Filipino Muslim and other Southeast Asian Muslims in terms of a coherent Christian worldview might such a turning to Christ occur in other places as well?

Cosmic Alignment

To begin, we must ask what worldview assumptions are central in the Southeast Asian worldview? One of the most important is the need for cosmic alignment. The cultural and racial roots of the Yakan, as I have indicated, are in Malaysia (cf. Sherfan 1976:11, Marohomsalic 1995:5). During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when Muslim traders from Arabia, Gujarat and Persia brought Sufism into Southeast Asia, they encountered a civilization already permeated with Hindu beliefs. One of these was a belief in cosmic order. To avoid chaos, Hindus believed it was important to be properly aligned with the cosmos, symbolized by the orderly progression of planets and stars. Cambodians demonstrated this belief by building temples such as AngkorWat in the exact form of constellations above. In other parts of Southeast Asia, cosmic orientation was linked with the formidable *naga* serpent, on whose back the world was believed to rest (McCoy 1982:144-145). Since alignment with the serpent was critical to avoiding disaster, its movements were charted in almanacs or calendars similar to those used by many Filipinos today (Benjamin 1979). The use of omens and divination to determine the right path, to know when the rice will sell and the most propitious day to take a trip is also indicative of this need for cosmic alignment. Since the cosmos was well ordered, people believed that by ordering their lives according to its rhythm and pattern of the stars and forces they could ensure order and avoid chaos on earth as well.

During the thirteenth century Sumatran shaykhs brought an Islamic cosmology into the Southeast Asian context that cohered with these beliefs (Bousfield 1985:207). The *Ka'bah* in Mecca, which is only one of several sites in Arabia featuring pre-Islamic astronomical orientations, replaced Angkor Wat as the new center of cosmic alignment; “a physical pointer to the presence of God” (King 1993:XIII:306, 1993:1:254; 1993:X:24). Instead of orienting themselves physically with the *naga* serpent, Muslim Malays used the *qibla* to turn toward Mecca and what they felt was a more powerful cosmic center in Islam. The Muslim calendar with its auspicious and inauspicious days, furthermore, met the need served formerly by *naga* serpent calendars to determine right times and places (cf. Musk 1989) while the explicit laws of the Qur'an and Hadith met their need to know how to behave to avert cosmic disorder. For many Southeast Asian Muslims, thus, the *Ka'bah* is revered not only because of its association with Abraham and Ishmael but also because it fulfills implicit needs for cosmic alignment.

Spirit Beliefs

Islamic teaching about the *jinn* also resonated with Malay and Filipino beliefs. Pre-Islamic Malay-Filipinos believed in spirits that were both benevolent and dangerous. The former could be asked to help with crops, health and good fortune, while the latter were appeased and controlled with rituals and offerings (Scott 1994:78). “People not like us,” another category of spirits, had their own animals and farmlands. Seen only by trained specialists, these spirits were believed to cause illness or misfortune if they were insulted or harmed.

Islam provided new categories for these spirits and sanctioned their relationship with humans. According to the Qur'an, *jinn* are spirits made from smokeless fire (Q 55:15). Often invisible (Q 7:27), Muslims believe they are intelligent and have tremendous physical powers. Contrary to biblical teaching, Muslims believe Muhammad, was sent to both humankind and the *jinn* (Q 46:29-32). In the Qur'an, when a group of *jinn* responded to Muhammad's preaching they became submitters and were given hope of Paradise (Q 72:1-2). *Jinn* may not be killed, therefore, even if they change into snakes or possess a person; they must be addressed as fellow Muslims and reminded of the laws of Allah (Dawood 1996:5236).

Islam also recognizes the vengefulness of the spirits. When humans accidentally urinate on them, pour hot water on them, or kill them, *jinn* may lawfully punish humans, according to Islam (Philips 1989:32-33). While not approved by Muslim jurists, thus, offerings of placation are common in Muslim societies. Since Southeast Asians experienced spirits in similar ways and recognized their potential benefits as well as danger, Islamic teaching gained credibility among the people.

Some Qur'anic parallels with Malay-Filipino beliefs were even more remarkable. According to the Qur'an, each human has a twin spirit or *qarina*—a devil or *jinn* of the opposite sex who accompanies the person and can be jealous of a spouse (Q 43:36). Muhammad had such a partner in Muslim belief, although he was aided by Allah and could order his *qarina* to do good (al-Ashqar 1998: 90-91). When Spaniards came to the Philippines in the sixteenth century they found that Filipinos believed in twin spirits, as well. Called *umalagad*, or spirit ancestors, they were considered personal guardians and companions (Scott 1994: 80-81). The coherence of these beliefs speeded Filipino acceptance of Islam.

Islam not only provided a sacred history for local spirits, it also provided the knowledge to deal with them through Islamic rituals and the Qur'an. The call to prayer, for instance, is used all over the Muslim world for keeping evil *jinn* and other spirits at bay. Qur'anic prayers, words and phrases are used to scold, threaten and curse the *jinn*, thereby controlling them (Philips 1989:63). Most importantly the Yakan know they can take refuge in God by reciting the last two chapters of the Qur'an, Surahs 113 and 114 along with the Verse of the Throne (Q 2:255)—a verse considered particularly powerful in warding off devils and breaking their spells (Philips 1989:72-76). Thus Islam provided Muslim Filipinos with a coherent explanation of indigenous spirits in Qur'anic stories, a rationale for their behaviors, and a means of controlling them through Qur'anic words and phrases. Believing Islam offered greater power over the spirits, the Yakan saw the relevance of Islam to their assumptions and needs and accepted it as their faith.

Incantations and Power Words

Among the more interesting Muslim beliefs are those concerned with divination, incantations and metaphysical power. This knowledge links the Yakan not only with the Qur'an but with the science of ancient Greeks, translated into Arabic during the ninth through eleventh centuries. While Westerners simply label these practices "magic" or "superstition" they have numerous referents in Muslim eyes. "White magic" for instance, describes something that appears to be real but is a falsification. This is known as *sihr*, and is reprehensible in Muslim law. "Black magic" or sorcery is forbidden in Islam as well, especially if it is gained through the assistance of evil *jinn* or transmitted by fallen angels (Bosworth 1997:567, 569).

During the medieval period, however, definitions of magic were broader. When Muslim armies advanced into Persia, Syria and Egypt, they added Hellenistic philosophy to basic Muslim beliefs. During Filipino Islamization, Sufi mystics combined Neoplatonic teachings on astrological science with Muslim beliefs in the power of the Qur'an to tap into the spirituality of the planets or manipulate the secret properties of numbers and magic squares. Classified by Muslim scholars as "occult" or hidden sciences (*khafiyah*) in contrast to the open sciences (*jaliyyah*) such as mathematics, they were none the less plausible. Hadidji Khalifa, for instance, drawing on Ibn Khaldun, understood *sihr* to refer to the *physical sciences* of the time. Using Greek categorization as his guide, he considered divination; natural magic; the powers of the Most Beautiful Names of God; numbers; sympathetic magic; demonic conjuration; incantations; the invocation of the spirits of plants; instantaneous disappearance from sight; spells and the use of medicinal plants all part of the natural universe (Bosworth 1997:568). As sciences, these domains were also the most sophisticated knowledge of the time.

Today's acceptance of these practices is, thus, logical for many Muslims, given their assumptions. The use of incantations and charms, for instance, was permitted by the Prophet Muhammad as long as Muslims avoided *shirk* or associating anything with God—a common practice among Jews as well (Mishkat, Book XXI, Chapter I). Many such objects were made from the words of the Qur'an, the names of important Muslims, including Muhammad, and most of all, from the ninety-nine names of God.

Southeast Asians had believed in the benefits of occult power for hundreds of years before Islam came. Hindu Malays had introduced Filipinos to Sanskrit words and charms for power, including *mantra*, which were used in farming, fighting, curing sickness, treating snakebites, countering vampires, at birth and at teeth filing. They were also used to enhance a person's beauty, to

weaken a rival or to divert a bullet (Winstedt 1925:52-53). When Islamic mystics arrived, Malay specialists studied Islamic books of divination and borrowed their Qur'anic amulets. Into their old incantations they placed the more efficacious names of Allah and Muhammad, although oftentimes in impious contexts (Winstedt 1925:46-47).

Today, many such books on divination and spells, called *kitab*s, teach the numerical value of the letters of the Arabic alphabet and are used for divination (Nasr 1976:206-207). Even more commonly known is the Da'wah Table, a system of incantations to establish friendship or hatred, to cause and cure sickness and death, and to achieve one's wishes using the twelve signs of the zodiac, the seven planets and the four elements. Although much of the lore is based on Hindu customs and Neoplatonic ideas from Persian Sufism, it built on assumptions that were considered scientific at the time (Hughes 1895:72-73). Many Muslims understand Qur'anic charms and incantations to be gifts of mercy sent down by God. Thus, it is no wonder Southeast Asians and Filipinos celebrated this new form of knowledge (Skeat 1967:465). Ricklefs, for instance, refers to a nineteenth century version of the *Babad Tana/I Jawi* which says, "At that time many Javanese wished to be taught the religion of the Prophet and to learn supernatural powers and invincibility" (1985:40).

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

When I asked Yakan women about their religious knowledge, they referred obliquely to these things as "deep knowledge." One said she had been given a wedding invitation by a *jinn*. Another said she needed to have a "strong power" to prevent her husband from being interested in another woman. A third recalled a time when Yakan women knew *tawal* or incantations that could enhance their beauty. All were sensitive to cosmic alignment, whether in the construction of their house, their position in prayer or their placement in the grave. None of these women had the personal knowledge to deal with the situations themselves; in each case it was necessary that they consult a specialist to have the benefit of specialized metaphysical knowledge. This dependence on specialists contrasts sharply with the personal knowledge that all Christians have with respect to God's will and power. When I asked a woman who had attended the Yakan Christian school to recall her strangest experience there, she replied, "They expected me to pray!" "Why was that strange?" I asked. "Because I don't know the language of the spirits!" she replied.

Huge epistemological shifts are taking place in the Islamic world that affect the women we desire to reach. Caught between the assumptions of medieval Islam with its potions, incantations and powers and the law of revivalist Muslims who reject these rituals as *bid'ah* or innovation, many women do not know what they believe. They vary in their familiarity with the older worldview, in their personal experience with spirits and powers, and in the trust they place in indigenous religious specialists vis á vie *Shari'ah*-trained imams. Older women and women in the interior will likely value Islam for the way it meets the old worldview—its preoccupation with cosmic order, *jinn* and powerful words. Younger women, however, taught in modern schools, will likely be ignorant of this worldview and more open to a modern interpretation of Islam. An effective presentation of the gospel, thus, must be adjusted to address both views.

A Response to Religious Specialists

Most importantly, we must show the coherence of the Christian faith to worldview needs in areas outside our own. Several suggestions can be made towards a coherent apologetic. First, Muslims must know that Christians can have spiritual knowledge themselves, independent of religious specialists, because we are individually born of God (John 3:16). In their terms, all Christians are specialists—we know the language of God and are thus able to speak with God through the Holy Spirit (Shaw 1981). Even the most uneducated Christian woman, thus, can know the mysteries of the universe because she is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and through His illumination can understand the Word of God. It is necessary to stress, however, that this is personal knowledge—each Christian must believe and be “in Christ” herself to grow in godliness. Depending on the missionary for prayers, rituals and spiritual advice, thus, may be in line with cultural patterns but it may also indicate a failure of discipleship.

A Response to Cosmic Alignment

The need for alignment, secondly may also be addressed from the Bible. A natural cycle of time, based on God’s divine plan, is described in Ecclesiastes 3. Jesus also spoke of a cosmic time that was based on the wisdom of God; in perfect alignment with His Father, Jesus knew when “his time” had come (John 17:1). He urged his followers to be alert for hidden times and seasons discernable only through His Spirit (Mark 13:33). The basis of Christian alignment, thus, is not through astrology divination or the use of science but through Christ. Indeed, the Bible teaches it is not for human beings to know God’s sacred times (Acts 1:7) but to walk in trust, depending on Him at all times (Ps. 62:8). While the Muslim convert may long and ask for “Christian” ways to divine the future or make practical decisions, they must be led to trust in God and imitate Abraham’s walk of faith. Ultimately, well being in the New Testament is not through imitating a cosmic pattern or praying in a certain direction but being aligned with God through Jesus Christ.

Even holy sites are unnecessary in Christian belief; when God takes up residence in the believer through faith in Christ, there is no longer a need for a spatial center like Mecca “where God is;” God already lives in His new temple, the Christian believer. Thus, for women who long to know which path to take or the correct direction and time for prayer, the good news is that they can be born again of God into true freedom. As God’s spirit mercifully flows through them, He will direct their paths (Prov 3:5-6) and work *all* things for their good and God’s glory (Rom. 8:28). They will then also be able to glorify God in all things, even eating and drinking, rather than through only religious rituals (1 Cor. 10:31).

A Response to Spirits

Many Christians, thirdly, must understand the complexity of Muslim interactions with spirits in order to provide a relevant discipleship. As we have seen, Islam leaves Muslims vulnerable to spirits by its teaching that *jinn* can also accept Muhammad’s teachings and become Muslims. When women have relationships with spirits in the Zar cult or contract spirit marriages and barter with spirits for what they need, they may not feel they are contradicting the Qur’an. Only when women realize the selfish nature and evil intent of all demonic spirits will they see their true plight.

More importantly, Muslim women must learn to fear God more than they fear the spirits. Early Christians recognized God’s sovereignty over illness, trials and death (I Cor. 11:30; Matt. 10:28). They were unafraid of spirits because Christ overcame all evil powers in His resurrection (Eph.

2:1-10). Although Muslims believe only Solomon had power over the *jinn*—through his magic ring (Philips 2000)—Christians know that even the lowliest Christian can rebuke these evil spirits (James 4:7; Luke 10:17). A Christian’s primary concern, therefore, is not learning prayers to defeat Satan or learning about the demonic world but avoiding sin. Sin alone can cause the Christian to grieve the Spirit of God and separate her from God’s power and purposes (Eph. 4:30). Understanding and addressing all the ways Muslims interact with the *jinn* will help to assure them of the truth of the Word and the sufficiency of Christ.

A Response to Powerful Words

Finally, for many Muslims a primary relevance of Islam is in the practical use of Qur’anic words as spells. Spoken at the right time and the right way these Arabic words are believed to shield babies from danger, recall children from the possession of spirits, protect women’s chastity and provide inner cleansing. Undoubtedly these spells “work” in a magical way but because they are associated with the *barakah* of Qur’anic words and are performed for good purposes, they are not synonymous with “magic” in Muslim thinking.

Too often we have tried to replace the belief in spells and divination with education or modern science. These are, however, secular explanations that disassociate God from the world and ignore the reality of the powers themselves. Muslims must understand that the powers behind occult sciences do not come from God or glorify Him; while they may actually manipulate objects and control people’s behaviors for a time they will not result in a lasting moral transformation. Only those who are born again into the life of Christ have the spiritual power to avoid adultery, cease thieving and love others as they live out Christ’s life in the Holy Spirit. We must teach the superiority of spiritual gifts and the day-to-day transforming power of the Holy Spirit as a response to Qur’anic powers (I Cor. 12; Matt. 22:29; Luke 1:35; Acts 1:8; Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor 4:7).

Conclusion

“Alternative realities” are possible because “reasonable individuals deduce the workings of their universe from a variety of different assumptions” (Hexham and Poewe 1986:16). As Hexham and Poewe remark, “anyone who wants to communicate effectively with members of new religions must enter their thought world . . . by recognizing the logic of their beliefs” (1986:14). By and large, Western Christians are products of the Enlightenment and a modern worldview. In our personal and conceptual experience, we are on the other side of the Copernican revolution from many of our Muslim neighbors and may need to think in more biblical terms to understand them. What seems logical to many Muslims is foreign to us, not because we are more rational or better educated, but because our assumptions and epistemologies differ. As a result, we fail to see the significance of these concepts for the people we serve and the way they cohere to make Islamic teachings plausible.

Unintentionally, our presentation of Christ is likely to be more relevant to a modern or postmodern time and context than to the worldview of many our Muslim neighbors still in a premodern framework. In the power and illumination of the Holy Spirit, let us work for coherence, striving to apply the gospel to all their concepts in order that they may know God’s deep knowledge—that in Jesus Christ, men and women can know and be known by God.

For more on this topic, read [A Worldview Approach Among Muslim Women](#) [ISBN 8708-370-1], edited by Cynthia A. Strong and Meg Page.

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