External and Internal Pressures Faced by Christians in the Arabian Gulf

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Lay or ordained Christians who come to the Gulf area, on company transfer or through a church, will encounter a variety of external and internal pressures that will impact their Christian witness. These pressures may be all for the good. The external pressures of having to adapt to the new culture may help weed out religious bias from genuine religious conviction while the Islamic social and religious restrictions can help sharpen Christian apologetics. Additionally, internal pressures within the Christian expatriate community, with all its cultural and denominational diversity, can help clarify one’s theology.

Both Bahrain and Oman, countries where I enjoyed the privilege of ministry over the last two years, are in the Arabian Gulf. Oil-rich countries, they are monarchical in government and tribal in outlook. The oil has brought change quickly here during the last fifty years, particularly in Oman. Bahrain and Oman have raced to develop the infrastructures common to developed countries, and this race has necessitated an influx of huge labor pools. While the government filled technical, military, and advisory jobs primarily with Westerners, the grunt work (the bulk of the task) was carried out by Asians. Even so, there is in these countries scant public acknowledgment of the expatriate contribution. There is instead a plan to replace expatriates by nationals as quickly as possible.

In recent years the internal political pressures to provide greater employment for their own nationals have forced Bahrain and Oman to attempt to "Bahrainize" and "Omanize" many jobs. Certain sectors (banking, for example), have progressed well towards this goal but entry level jobs in the service and construction sectors do not attract Gulf nationals. As Jordan before them, Gulf countries are discovering that there is an absolute minimum number of expatriates below which they cannot go without affecting productivity.

This fact virtually assures a continuing expatriate population in these two countries for the next decade. Only the "complexion" of these groups will change as more and more Asians, working for lower salaries, take the jobs of Westerners. Since many of these people are Christians, the church in numerous denominational expressions will continue to be a part of life in the Gulf. Christians here will always face a variety of external and internal pressures, and
the struggle will be to adapt in the non-essentials while retaining the essentials of the Christian witness.

External Pressures on the Christian

Cultural Adaptation

External pressures vary by place. While Saudi Arabia is very restrictive, Bahrain and Oman tend to appreciate the Christian population. They allot land for churches, allow the import of Bibles and Christian media, and generally show an interest in the Christian church. A favorite story reports that Bahrain’s Emir asked the National Evangelical Church to replace the burned-out bulbs that light the blue cross on the side of the church tower. Apparently he likes to see this witness to Bahrain’s history when he goes for a drive.

This anecdote illustrates the friendly attitude Gulf residents of all levels have toward the "people of the book," as Christians are called in the Qur’an. Nevertheless, due to the very nature of monarchical government, Gulf Christians must remember that religious tolerance is a variable dependent on the leaders in power. One monarch and his advisors may favor Christianity; the next monarch and his advisors may not. It is trite but true to recall that monarchies are not democracies. Expatriates in the Gulf should not realistically expect to find here the familiar freedoms of home. Nevertheless, the freedoms they do find are considerable. Christians may have churches with government approval. They may worship regularly, conduct Bible studies, and have concerts. What they have no way of knowing, however, is how long such freedoms will last.

Within these freedoms the Christian in the Gulf must adapt in a variety of ways. One basic adaptation occurs at the level of the senses. Moving from a Western country (Canada, in my case) to the Middle East involves many cultural adjustments. My previous experience in Israel and China and my undergraduate studies in international business could only prepare me in the grossest sense to encounter the unique Arab culture. For example, nine months passed in Bahrain and several months in Oman before I could sleep through the night without being awakened by the call to prayer. It is also difficult to adjust to the Friday sermon broadcast over the same loudspeakers, often in a ranting tone.

In addition to the blaring calls from the mosques are the loud, emotional conversations of Arab men and women. Their tone, whether in ordinary conversation or trading, carries a vitality and enthusiasm we tend not to appreciate in the West. Then, too, there are the aggressive smells of Arab life: the scent of spicy and florid coffee coming from a variety of coffee shops mixed with the scent of exotic and spicy food float above the fragrance of men’s cologne and women’s frankincense. There are also the less sociable odors given off by a work force living in the poverty of labor camps or crowded flats.
earning about twenty-five dollars per week, and having restricted access to clean conditions. Despite the oil money, the poor are here.

The Gulf’s climate is hot and often muggy, topping fifty degrees Celsius (although by law it may not be reported above forty-nine). This latter stipulation avoids the granting of time off from work that would be required by another law. Despite the heat, women and men must remain covered in public. Expatriate men should not wear shorts except as part of some sport activity and expatriate women who dare to go out in shorts will be called "loose" and may even be quickly sent home! The constant heat drives the affluent from air-conditioned house to air-conditioned car to air-conditioned store and back again. Outdoor sports must be played either at night or during the winter season when temperatures fall to the twenties Celsius. The poor, living in crowded flats or labor camp buildings, struggle through the heat as best they can.

The wealthy drive air-conditioned BMWs, Mercedes, and Jaguars, and are bent on getting richer than even their cars would indicate. All expatriates working here must have Bahraini or Omani sponsorship. This means that any national may, for a fee, sponsor a foreign worker. This fee is agreed upon by the national and the expatriate and is most often a monthly amount. Thus, without doing any work, the national grows rich on the backs of the many foreigners he sponsors.

This wealth is seen in houses of palatial proportions surrounded by high walls. There is something ironical about these walls, given the nature of the Gulf Arab man who, though intensely private about family, is very outgoing and social with Westerners. Equally visible are the poor who live in small houses, randomly jumbled together, often without air-conditioning and sophisticated sanitation.

Social interaction, like the senses, also undergoes a process of adaptation. This is a culture where women mix with women and men mix with men. It is possible that one man may never see another man’s wife or female children, because women are veiled. In the interior of Oman, women often wear black leather masks in public to hide their faces. Gulf women wear outer robes that completely cover their body. This robe is nearly always black in Bahrain but may be either black or multi-colored in Oman. Clothing thus serves to reinforce the message that, on the surface at least, this is a puritanical society.

Bahraini television underlines the same message in amusing ways. Contrary to Oman, Bahrain does not allow the average person to have a satellite dish. Bahrainis are thus dependent on the government television network for programming. Films from the West may be shown but are always cut whenever a kiss is in the offing. The result is that the viewer sees two people moving towards each other to share a moment of intimacy, but suddenly repelled by an apparent force field. This happens even when the characters are husband and wife or father and daughter.
Such puritanism is also expressed in daily social contact. Foreigners should not look directly at women on the street and all touch is to be avoided. To honor these restrictions when shopping can be so difficult that it feels like running an obstacle course or walking through a mine field. It demands constant attention to where you go and where you look. Because folk Islam considers a foreigner's look or praise to carry the evil eye, expatriates should not compliment their host on his handsome children even though he is extremely proud of them.

Bahrainis and Omanis are fiercely proud of their heritage and see themselves as a notch above expatriates. The Qur'an encourages this belief by teaching that a Muslim slave girl is above any Christian. The discovery of large oil fields has in recent decades injected billions into the economy and this wealth has only served to confirm the Gulf Arab's sense of preeminence.

Perhaps the Gulf area has become too rich, too quickly, for with the influx of money has come rapid change in both the possessions and behavior of the nouveau riche. The traditional warmth and hospitality of the Middle East are giving way to the modern reality of young Bahrainis and Omanis elbowing their way into a new future of deal making on the golf course. Nowhere is this change in attitude more obvious than at the street level. Foreigners driving in Oman must give way to Omanis coming up from behind or risk being stopped ahead by a patrol officer. This officer will be responding to an Omani's complaint relayed to him from his station. The officer will pull the expatriate driver over and "explain" the modus vivendi in Oman. The Saudis, who help fund Bahrain's government, pull off driving stunts in Bahrain that would draw severe fines and reprimands anywhere in the West. Expatriate shopkeepers in Bahrain must come out and give roadside service to nationals who summon them with their car horns, all the while defiantly halting traffic.

In all these matters Christians can only keep their criticism and judgment to themselves and resist the tendency to make comparisons with familiar systems back home. Where they can make life a little easier for the poor in labor camps, they do, but the task is huge. Where they can help in cases of injustice, they do, but very diplomatically, for the culture here is quick to remind them of their place as an expatriate. Christians are constantly aware that the thought patterns of Arabs and Asians differ from those of Westerners, and they must make every effort to think in those same patterns. This can be a daunting task when trying to get a telephone, to pay a parking ticket, or to renew an important document. Because no requests for such things as job approval and visitor or residence visas may be made by the foreigner, the government places Public Relations Officers between ministries such as Labor and Immigration and the expatriate. In these important areas the expatriate is kept at arm's length from the government. Additionally, the scheduling and keeping of appointments with ministries are iffy, and the normal reply to the Westerner's request for
confirmation is, "If God wills it." Christians are thus forced to acknowledge the exhortation of James 4:15 and try to bend their minds to the host culture.

In the Gulf area public criticism outside the marketplace or home does not exist. The newspapers and the television and radio stations are government owned or controlled and a saccharine praise of the government’s benefactions is daily fare. The news concentrates on the outside world and inevitably points out any breakdown in the social systems of non-Islamic cultures. Identical breakdowns in Gulf countries go unreported. The occasional CNN satellite news report about social unrest gives us more news about the country we live in than does that country itself. Governments in the Gulf do not want to focus on their problems and there is no realistic introspection of the national character. Still, very few citizens seem to realize that this is unusual in comparison to democratic countries.

These cultural distinctives are but representative of a host of others which demand that Westerners be willing to adjust, adapt, and even appreciate. The Christian especially must appreciate the differences, without judging, if Christian witness is to be unimpeded by a colonial, imperialistic, or critical attitude. The different attitudes of this culture toward the senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching must be allowed to change the Christian’s attitude. Different social patterns and interactions must be accepted and understood for what they reveal of the Arab character and for the opportunity they offer to develop points of contact between the Muslim and Christian experience. That the muscles of such Christian virtues as patience and forbearance get a workout is all to the good.

External Pressures on the Christian

Christianity and Islam

A Westerner in the Middle East might expect the relationship between Islam and Christianity to be primarily intellectual. As guests in Muslim countries, Christians might expect their hosts to engage in discussions about the Bible and the Qur’an, about various Christian doctrines, and about the relationship between religion and the state. Although these issues are discussed, the relationship goes beyond the intellectual because the teachings of Islam invade the very ways Christians are permitted to express their faith. To be sure one may engage someone in a discussion of Jesus and his teachings but this must be done with great tact and with appreciation for points in common. Besides being monotheistic, Islam is also a religion of the book, albeit a book different from the Bible. At the street level the Qur’an is understood to be mechanically inspired by God. It is, for Muslims, God’s most beautiful, ultimate, and final revelation. By contrast, Muslims believe the Bible has been corrupted by its human authors and this is their constant refuge when the Bible contradicts the Qur’an. This human corruption explains why the Christian teaching about sin
is faulty. Human beings are not by nature sinners. They were created by God to be his noble partners in creation. The prophets are sinless and a Christian would run a serious risk if in open-air preaching even to other Christians, he were to call Jacob or Isaac a sinner. Christ’s cross was not necessary to atone for sin since no atonement is needed. Islam rejects the crucifixion because God could never have allowed his prophet to be so treated.

Such intrusion into Christians’ ability to preach their own theology goes farther. Because Islam disallows any representations of the prophets or God, Christians have difficulty importing books or videos that seek to portray Jesus. Consequently any videos that are allowed in or which get by normal airport checks are copied in volume for sale to the Christian community. The Christian apologetic becomes a painstaking process of earning the right to allow the Bible to witness to its own contents. Islamic theology, based in part on human logic, challenges the Christian’s defense of the biblical message that the gospel which is salvation for us who believe, remains "foolishness to Gentiles."

Internal pressures on the Christian

To say that the "face" of Christianity throughout the world will vary according to the culture in which it seeks expression is a truism. This face will be molded largely by the external pressures placed on it by its host culture. In addition, there are significant internal pressures, both doctrinal and moral, which originate within the Christian community.

This community encompasses a variety of denominational backgrounds: Catholic, Episcopalian, Pentecostal, Orthodox (including Indian, Syrian and Coptic), Mar Thomite, Seventh Day Adventist, and Reformed, all broken down along language lines. In Oman alone one can find at least thirty-one different Christian groups at worship. This varied Christian witness to such central doctrines as the sovereignty of God, the person and work of Christ, and the administration of the sacraments results in a mixed testimony to Muslims. Christians feel the internal pressure of that mixed testimony, and are often called upon to explain and justify the plethora of doctrinal differences.

While sensitive Christians will seek to adapt their lifestyles to that of the host country, just how far should they go? In Oman, for example, there are at least sixty thousand Christians who have come primarily for the job opportunities. All have traded the comforts of the familiar for the challenge of fifty-degree heat and the opportunity to earn tax-free salaries (the Westerners), or five times their home salaries (the Asians). Although Westerners must put up with a reduction in status and Easterners are treated like servants, the money is good. In a place where labor is purchased at a relatively high rate, acquiescence to the prevailing morality may appear as nothing more than a grateful response. Yet, I recall the poignant accounts of Christians in Bahrain who were given the choice either to falsify repair bills or to lose their jobs.
Then too there were those who were beaten for mistakes, forced to live under stairways in houses, or pressured for sexual favors in return for continued employment. All of this is endured for the chance to make money. Thus, Jesus’ warning that human beings cannot serve both God and mammon is keenly felt in the Gulf. When Asian Christians return home on leave they find their own witness pooh-poohed by their poorer compatriots and fellowship is trivialized. Sometimes they purchase ingots of gold in the Gulf, and do not always master the temptation not to declare them when passing through customs.

Christians must decide for themselves what is or is not morally right within the host’s moral climate. Moreover, within any congregation of multinational people, there will be disagreements about right and wrong. For example, the Christians in the Gulf may find themselves at odds with members of their own church over whether or not the copying and selling of foreign video and audio tapes violates the commandment not to steal. This important current issue crystallizes the point. If the Arab mentality allows that there is nothing immoral about copying and selling the fruits of someone else’s ingenuity and creativity, what should be the response of Christians who are tied by the golden knot of employment? Do they argue that they are in a part of the world where international copyright has not yet reached? If Christians are to be guided in all cultures by the moral code of the decalogue, how do they determine when a commandment of God is at issue?

This is particularly important when the Christian church or Christian parachurch organizations offer Christian and secular materials. These are sold to a large, primarily Asian population which would not or could not pay the high prices charged if the materials were imported in the regular manner. One Christian leader argued that pirated audio and video tapes were at least preferable to the bump and grind of MTV and the Hindi movies channel. Another missionary argued that his children should not be deprived of first-run movies on video even when they are pirated from American or European movie houses. Still another parachurch representative, copying and selling movies such as *Spartacus*, *Cleopatra*, and *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, argued that since the money raised is used to spread the Scriptures, it cannot be wrong.

It seems apparent from such arguments that missionaries are no longer willing to sacrifice. Where once people gave up their culture (food, music, entertainment, access to books) to live as the foreign nationals live, modern missionaries try to take their culture with them. That culture also brings a high-technology approach to gospel witness. Whereas in the past, the Bible and a few tracts sufficed, today videos of the life of Christ and Christian music tapes seem required to reach souls for the Lord. No doubt this trend has been influenced by the movement of the world towards the "global village," but these changes do raise questions about what is essential in the methodology of Christian witness.
What happens to the Christian witness in Gulf countries when that witness itself is under internal pressure? Does the end justify the means? Does family peace bought at the cost of supporting a culture that finds no problem with appropriating whatever it finds useful, despite the objection of the producers of the goods, warrant this kind of Christian witness? Does placing inexpensive Christian materials in the hands of the poorer Asians (some of whom come to faith in Christ because of them) warrant the expansion of the kingdom in this way? Is getting money in this fashion justified by the distribution of Scripture portions? Is there one morality for North America and another for the Gulf?

In a short piece about Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam in the United States, a *Time* magazine staffer wrote: "In traditional American politics, the luster of success is reserved for those who defend the moral high ground. No longer. The high ground belongs to another era now, an old moral topography too idealistic for present use" (*Time* [June 17, 1996], 67). In the mission fields of the world, has the moral high ground become an old topography too idealistic for present use? Does the morality of Sinai inform or embarrass the modern missionary? Or do we say that, provided the kingdom work is being directly or indirectly aided, any means to that end may be justified? Moreover, what do we do with an actual viewpoint heard here that argues that on such moral issues, "We could [just as easily] accuse Jesus of violating the rights of the bakers and fishmongers and stealing profits from them when he fed the 5,000 and the 4,000 through a miracle." When such arguments made by Christian leaders are unchallenged by the official Christian church, we know that at least in these countries the nature of Christian witness has changed. The Christian attitude that seems to be winning out in the Gulf is the variety that believes that what matters are numbers, and that whatever achieves those numbers is acceptable.

This belief does not acknowledge that a sovereign God is able to save without any human participation. It fails to see that how Christians go about their witness is in fact part of that witness. It takes no account of the damage done both (1) to the expatriate community and (2) to its witness to Islam. In the case of (1), should expatriates become convicted of the fact that their library of audio and video resources was obtained contrary to God's command not to steal, and to do to others as we would have them do to us, they will encounter the problem of what to do with the tapes. This might not be crucial for high-paid Westerners, but it would be a serious issue for Asians. Questions will be raised as to why the church has given no direction on this issue. In the case of (2), Christians must ask themselves how they will teach their Muslim friends that the sacrifice of Christ enables people to keep the commandments out of love and gratitude to God when their own actions belie that teaching. How will they escape the woes of Matthew 23 if their words and actions do not coincide?
These internal and external pressures on the Christian in the Arabian Gulf combine to challenge the Christian minister, lay or ordained, to redefine the nature and shape of their ministry. Can we adapt to the external pressures of Islamic society and Islamic theology without compromising the core of the gospel? Are we coworkers with God doing what God could do alone but chooses to do through us, or are we frantically working against some spiritual countdown that justifies desperate attempts to win souls? How this redefinition takes place is, I believe, crucial to whether Christianity will make major inroads in the states of the Arabian Gulf.