

## NEWS & OPINIONS

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# “My God! You are a Mussulman Man Like Me!”

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This is about a conversation between me, an anthropologist, and a peasant farmer who lived in a relatively isolated village in central Afghanistan. In this conversation some of the presuppositions of the farmer about foreigners like me were overturned by some of the things he learned about me, my faith, and the world that I come from. In the end he spontaneously pronounced me a moral person like himself. I conclude with a discussion of how our interpersonal conversations can lead to deeper personal relationships.

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It is not uncommon for people in one religious tradition to suppose that folks in other religious traditions are less pious, less moral than themselves, maybe even condemned to hell as unbelievers (Accad and Andrews 2020). This paper is about the mutual surprise of two strangers to discover that, despite their contrary religious backgrounds, they could recognize in the other a common ground of humanity.

The conversation was between me and a peasant farmer named Khodāhdād,<sup>1</sup> whom I met in 1967 in an isolated valley high in the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan. I had gone to Afghanistan to study the diverse customs of the people of the country and like others doing field work I brought to the project my own moral presumptions—presumptions that would be tested, as often happens to us when we come to know people unlike ourselves. As my conversation with Khodāhdād entailed a confrontation of different religious presumptions it seems imperative that I reveal some details of the moral perspective that I brought to that moment.<sup>2</sup>

### My Background

I grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and as a high school student I became involved in a Christian movement known as Young Life. When I went to university I

became active in a similar organization, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.<sup>3</sup> Through the people I came to know and admire in those organizations I made a serious personal commitment to follow Christ as I best knew how. As it happened, however, throughout my university experience I was struggling with a problem I had with God, for He was not answering my prayers about an issue that was deeply painful to me. Eventually, I decided to seek a more specific understanding of the faith that I had espoused. While I knew a number of proof-texts in the Bible, I knew little about the Bible as a whole, so I set out to read it in hopes I could better understand what I had gotten into. That decision would be the most significant educational experience of my university experience. By the time I had graduated I had read thoughtfully through the whole Bible almost twice, and I came away from the experience with a different perspective of myself, my sense of what God was like, and what he was doing in human affairs. Honestly, I don't think the problem that had spurred my reading project had been resolved. But now it seemed less compelling, and it was by then absorbed within the grander, more comprehensive view I now had of what the Bible was all about. Of course, there would be much more to learn, and I continued to read regularly through the

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<sup>1</sup> The name is fictitious.

<sup>2</sup> I am deeply indebted to the Ford Foundation for supporting two years of field research in Afghanistan.

<sup>3</sup> Through those years I had never heard of someone who would later be associated with Tulsa, Oral Roberts.

Bible at my own pace.<sup>4</sup> It would be some years before I worked out my understanding of how God works among peoples in other societies. The effect was to generate in me an inner sense of gratitude and I wanted to give myself to a social activity that would seem an appropriate response.

Immediately after graduation I found an opportunity to teach English in Afghanistan. I was happy to sign a contract at the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington when Dr. Tabibi, the Afghan ambassador, asked me not to proselytize my faith in his Muslim country. I agreed. While I was animated to go to Afghanistan because of my faith I did not suppose that what I would be doing would be proselytizing. Anyway, I didn't know how to proselytize in my own language, much less in one I didn't know.

In Kabul I taught English to Afghan students in the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in an old building known as Habibia College, a school instituted in 1903 by King Habibullah Khan. It was a great experience for a 22-year-old that had scarcely ever been outside of Oklahoma. I spent much of my free time trying to learn the local language, Kabuli Persian, now called Dari. I got a tutor and also I sat outside trying to talk to the children playing in my street. It was great fun. But after two years my draft board disallowed me from staying. So I returned to the States where I ended up going to graduate school.

I was able to get back into Afghanistan in 1957 after doing my military service, this time with my new bride, and in the next few years Rita and I produced three children in Kabul. That was our home. This time I was again teaching English as a second language but employed by Teachers College Columbia University, which, as part of the United State Foreign Aid Program, had contracted to work with the Afghan government to develop its education program. Again, a supervisor, with some embarrassment, asked me to refrain from proselytizing (admitting that what he was doing was "uneducational."). My job was to teach English in the higher grades; I also worked in the production of English Language textbooks to be used throughout the country. We stayed in Kabul until late in 1964 when I was admitted into the doctoral program in anthropology at the University of Michigan.

Thus, when I returned to Afghanistan in 1966 to undertake anthropological field work I had studied

anthropology and Middle Eastern culture at the University of Michigan and the London University School of Oriental Studies and I still held to my Christian faith. Importantly, I had more facility in speaking Dari. It was exciting to be on the ground and able to undertake serious research among the peoples I had come to enjoy and admire.

## **The Bamyan Valley**

The location for my field project was the Bamyan Valley, a place famous for the giant Buddhas built by a Buddhist community that had flourished between the second and eighth centuries CE. Throughout history this valley had been a major depot of the Central Asian caravan traffic between India and China. The opportunity to do research among the citizens of this famous valley had come to me through the invitation of someone I met in Kabul. He was a local leader in a village in eastern Bamyan near the Shibar Pass. Shibar was the entre into Bamyan for travelers coming from Kabul. The trip entailed passing through Koh Daman to the Ghorband valley which eventually came to the base of the pass. Here the road began to rise abruptly as much as 2000 feet through a series of switchbacks to reach the summit of the pass, which is 9800 feet above sea level. From there the road descends into the Bamyan valley, a narrow east-west plain about 45 miles long, before it begins to rise into the highlands of Qarganatu. At the center of the valley where the largest Buddha looms over a small market town the plain is little more than a mile wide. Above this famous valley ascends the mountains of the Hindu Kush, at its highest point 13,100 feet above sea level.

The eastern boundary of this valley is an escarpment created by the subduction of the South Asian tectonic plate under the Eurasian tectonic plate at this point. This is Shibar and from it water flows three different directions. From its eastern slopes moisture descends into the Ghorband valley to form a river that joins the Kabul River which in turn flows into the Indus which debouches into the Indian Ocean. Some waters flow westward into Bamyan and at a low point meet the waters flowing out of the western hills and from this juncture point they veer northward and they surge through the narrow Shikari Gorge, to enter the catchment area of the Oxus River, which in earlier times drained into the Aural Sea, but since Soviet times

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<sup>4</sup> See my 2016 chapters, 7 and 8, which discuss what the Bible says about people outside of the community of believers. My 2024 examines how the human moral imagination copes with crisis, using a terrible experience in Jewish history as an example.

have been diverted onto the cotton farms of Uzbekistan, leaving the Sea slowly to become a desert. Also, on the northwestern slopes of the Shibar escarpment water drains southward to form the Helmand River which, passing through the Registan Desert, dies in the Dasht-e Margo (“Desert of Death”) salt marshes bordering Iran.

The tribal peoples occupying the lands of the Hindu Kush are Hazaras, although at the market town below the largest Buddha some people call themselves Tajiks. Most Hazaras identify themselves as Imāmi Shia, (‘Ithnā ‘Ašaris, “Twelvers”) although in Shibar a sizeable community of Ismailis live among them. The East Asian features of these people suggest that the Hazaras originated somewhere in the Far East, possibly Mongolia.<sup>5</sup>

In my first year of my field-work in Bamyān I made bi-weekly forays into Shibar visiting friends of my patron in several villages. During the second year I studied the market town at the center of Bamyān. The conversation I describe here took place in spring 1967 in a village of Shibar. I suppose that other than their leaders few folks from this area traveled much beyond the market town.

Of course, in my manner and accent I stood out as a foreigner, a *khārijī*. And by implication I probably was not a Muslim. That is, I was an unbeliever, an infidel, a *kāfir*. This is a Qur’anic term and it meant, as in Sura 26:19, or 16:55, or 30:33, someone who “conceals” something, such as the truth. The term was applied to the Meccans who opposed the prophet early on (Sura 1:2) and so it had the sense of an unbeliever, thus an “infidel.” The Fiqh scholars trying to organize the obligations of believers used the term to mean someone who was condemned, bound for hell. That *kāfirs* are eternally damned is presumed by most folks in Afghanistan, according to several friends. And with that notion it has come to imply someone who has no scruples, is unclean and sexually promiscuous. A *kāfir*, I was told, will sleep with his mother and his sister. Jeffery Goldberg says of the students in the Darul Uloom madrasah that they believe Americans “will engage in sex with anything anywhere, all the time.” Goldberg when visiting the seminary was asked “whether American men were allowed by law to keep boyfriends and girlfriends at the same time.”<sup>6</sup>

In the Hazarajat the term *kāfir* connected with certain features of the environment, for the famous Buddha statues and the meditational caves carved into the limestone cliffs evoke a time when these valleys pulsed with a Buddhist civilization in which the people worshipped the giant idols that loom over the valley. And besides the Buddhas and the caves for meditation that that civilization left behind there were the ruins of their villages built high up in the tributary valleys of Bamyān. These ruins are known locally as *kāfir qalāhs*, “infidel forts.” Three times during the two years I was in the highlands of Bamyān someone said to me, in effect, “Your ancestors, your people, built these forts.” It was a mystifying statement to me at first, but eventually I came to realize that this was how I fitted into their world. I was a *kāfir*, an unbeliever like those who had built those towns, and so they supposed that it had been my people who built those *kāfir qalāhs*. They could not have been built by their ancestors, they reasoned, for their people are Muslims who eschew idolatry. To people of Shibar it made sense that my ancestors, *kāfirs* like me, had constructed the *kāfir qalās*.

### My Interlocutor

Khodādād was a non-literate peasant farmer of these highlands, as this account will reveal, little informed about the world I came from. I suspect he had scarcely ever been out of Shibar. So I avoid calling him a “typical Afghan.” Truly, I don’t know how to identify such a type anyway, and I am sure that my urban, educated, multi-lingual Afghan friends in Kabul would have been embarrassed to have Khodādād held up as “typical Afghan” of any sort. They would say, as he would say himself, that he was *kohband*, “mountain bound,” limited in his local experience to his home high in a Shibar valley. In fact, we were about three hours on foot to the main road and (in those days) about twelve-hours by car to Kabul.

So, it is worth emphasizing that such a conversation could not these days take place anywhere among the Afghanistan peoples. This is not the same world. No Afghan could be unaware of the foreign powers that have been involved in this country through four decades of war. The Communist/mujahedin war of 1978-1991 was started by the Soviet invasion, and the

<sup>5</sup> An excellent article on the Hazaras is in Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hazaras>.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Edwards (2017, 137).

opposition was enabled by money and materiel from the United States and Pakistan, not to mention several other countries of the industrial world. The little remarked internecine war among the Hazaras (1982-1984), in which Hazaras fought bitterly against each other, was largely due to the meddling of Iran. The vicious battle for Kabul in 1992-1996 between several mujahedin organizations was funded by several foreign powers: Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. The Taliban struggle with the Northern Alliance (1996-2001) was supported by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia while their opponents were backed by Iran, India and Russia. And finally, the Americans' attempt to crush the Taliban (abandoned by the Pakistanis and Saudis) in 2001-2002 was animated by their furious desire to find Osama Bin Laden. Thus, no Afghan, even a farmer in Shibar, could be unaware of the wider world in the current millennium, which is not to say that the people have had reason to abandon their beliefs about foreign *kāfirs*.

## The Conversation

This account of my conversation with Khodāhdād is based on notes taken down immediately after the conversation.

He squatted on the edge of a well-worn cotton rug that his uncle had graciously provided to shield my sleeping bag from the dirt floor for the few days I would be a visitor in his house.

"We hear a lot about your country nowadays. But that has only been for the last 15 years or so. Before then we never heard of your place. We heard about Iran and Germany and England—you know, where Peshawar is—and Russia . . . and China, but not about America. It must be far away. How long did it take you to get here? A week! Did you come by boat or by bus? By airplane! And it took you a week?" He sighed with amazement.

"Well," I said, "we weren't traveling all that time. We stopped along the way for two or three days in a couple of places."

"Ho! So far!" The further clarification was no help.

He ingressed a long draft of air through his teeth, the way a peasant farmer does when he's about to say something serious. "They tell me there is a big river over there somewhere, you know, that you have to cross before you come here."

"A big river?"

"That's what I heard—is there a big river over there?"

"You mean a big, wide stretch of water, a whole lot of water?" I couldn't remember the Afghan Farsi word for "ocean."

He grunted his affirmation.

"Well, it's a very lot of water, but it isn't a river because it isn't moving anywhere. I mean, it doesn't go anywhere, like the water does in a river."

"What does it do?"

"I guess it just sits there. Well . . . It's just there." I was stumped by my limitations in the language.

He seemed to ponder, blankly, to himself.

"Well, it isn't always necessarily quiet," I said. "The wind can blow and make it move around a lot" (I didn't know the word for "waves" either).

Suddenly I remembered the word for ocean: "It's a *bahr*," I said. It didn't help him; he lived in the mountains of a land-locked country that had scarce reason to deal with oceans, and it seemed to have no real significance to him. "River" (*darvā*) seemed to do just fine for him.

"So your country is covered with water," he said thoughtfully.

"No, no," I cut in impatiently, "there's water all around it, but of course it isn't on top of the country."

"Oh." He adjusted his crossed legs and changed the subject. "Do you have mountains like these?" I affirmed it was so.

"I hear you water your crops with airplanes."

"No, no," again I interrupted, "We only spread medicine over the crops with planes; we don't water crops that way."

"So you just irrigate your fields like we do."

"Well, yes, sometimes, but most of our farming is dryland."

"Dryland? All that wheat that comes to our country is from dryland?" He adjusted his feet again and leaned back on the cushion. "People say you have a machine that cuts the wheat for you. . . . It also threshes the wheat at the same time? . . . So then all you have to do is throw it in the air to separate the chaff. The machine does that too? Ho! Such a machine!"

"How much could this machine harvest in one day? Our whole valley in one day? I wish our government would give us one. Why doesn't your government give us one?"

I evaded the question by explaining that in my country the government doesn't give the machine to people; the farmers buy it themselves. "How much do they cost?"

"I'm not a farmer, so I suppose it would cost, maybe, \$4,000 dollars or more." (In 1969 dollars.)

“How much is that in rupas?”

“Maybe, about 32,000 rupas.”

“So much money! I suppose that’s even more than your women cost!”

“Oh, they don’t cost anything. I mean we don’t have to pay anything to the father for the girl.”

He sat up, gaping. “They are free?”

“Yes, we don’t even go to the parents. We talk directly to the girl and make the agreement face to face with her.”

He collapsed back on his cushion. The look on his face seemed to indicate profound amazement.

“You mean you just talk to her and . . . that’s all?”

He was speaking softly. “You just decide to take the girl and you just do it?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And then you are just man and wife? I mean she just goes home with you?”

“Well, no. Of course, we have to get married before we do that.” (Again, this was 1967, and this was Afghanistan. I didn’t mention “the new morality.”)

“Get married. So you have to get married over there too? Well!” He sat up with renewed interest, adjusted his brightly embroidered skullcap, and peered wide-eyed into my face. “You have to tell other people, right?”

“Yes, we call our mullah and he marries the boy and girl.”

“You have a mullah? And he marries you! What do you know! You have a mullah! What does he do? Does he say something?”

“Well, he prays and . . .”

“He prays?” he interrupted with a start. “Your mullahs pray?”

“Of course they do!” I was offended.

“What do you know. . . . Wallah [By God!], sir, I didn’t know!” He clapped his hand on the calf of his leg. “A guy would never know. I mean . . . if I hadn’t talked to you . . . Well, do you pray? I mean, do *you* pray too, or is it just the mullah?”

“Yes, of course, we pray too.”

“What do you do? Do you kneel and bow, do you do *rakas* [prostrations, bows] like we do?”

“No, we don’t pray quite like you do.”

“How often do you have to pray?”

“We don’t have to pray any set number of times. We don’t have rules like that.”

“No rules?” He was not impressed.

I thought I had to explain. “What I mean is we believe that God has given us salvation as a gift so we don’t have any rules except to love Him with all our heart and to love each other.”

“You don’t have to do anything.” He was having trouble understanding. “Do you have a prophet? We believe in 124,000 prophets, have you heard that?”

“Yes.” I wanted to move to safer ground. “We are free to consider what we believe and to believe what we like. I believe in Jesus.”

“In Jesus! Well, so do we! Sir, if I hadn’t talked to you I wouldn’t have known. So you Americans believe in Jesus!”

“Oh no, not all Americans. We are free to believe in Jesus or not to, as we like.”

“Believe as you like, huh?” He drew his feet up into a squat, swiped his face with the back of his hand. He wasn’t impressed.

I tried to explain. “We think it is better for people to be free to believe as they want—I mean we don’t think people are worshipping if they are forced to worship in a certain way.”

“You don’t have to do anything and you don’t have to believe anything.” Now he was really unimpressed.

I tried to clarify, “Well, if we follow Jesus we have to believe something, but we don’t force other people to believe what we believe, because we don’t call it true faith if it doesn’t come from within.”

“It has to come from within.” He seemed to ponder the idea tolerantly. Then he exclaimed, “By God, Sir, you are a *musulmān* man!” The word “*musulmān*” means a Muslim, a person who submits to the will of God (Arabic /*s.l.m*/ “submit”), but here it had the sense of an upright man who believed in God and submitted to him.<sup>7</sup> “Sir,” he said, “You are a *musulmān* man, like me.”

“Yes,” I said. “I am a *musulmān* man like you.”

Our conversation was at that moment interrupted. Anyway, it seemed to reach an end point when Khodādād saw something in me that he could relate to. I was upright like him, he had decided, even if I was not a Muslim. He took me to be a *musulmān* man in the sense that like him I was a man of faith and good will. That was enough for him.

His discovery was, in a sense, my discovery too. I enjoyed coming to know him as a person of good will like myself. Coming from our different social backgrounds, and despite our different grounds of

<sup>7</sup> In Persian the phrase is *musulmān ādam* (مسلم آدم). For instance, one can say, and I have heard it several times, referring to a respected individual, “*ū besyar musulmān ādam ast*,” meaning the individual is the epitome of a good Muslim, an upright person.

truth and reality, and the odd beliefs and practices he had heard about from me, he and I could accept each other as morally analogous to ourselves. We had a common ground of mutual empathy.

Ethnography aspires to understand the social lives of others. We perform our tasks, as best we can, seeking to be as empathetic as possible. For some of us, says the philosophical anthropologist Michael Jackson, ethnographic work can be a kind of controlled experiment on ourselves in hopes of “enlarging our understanding of what it means to be human” (2009, 232). It enables us to see ourselves in the other, “as one might be or might have been under other circumstances” (ibid., 233). The reward for our projects is an ability to perceive ourselves in the “other.” It is a perception unlike what we normally call “science.”<sup>8</sup> “Much as we try to name, contain, and control our interactions with the world around us,” says Jackson, “the interplay between self and other has a life of its own” (ibid., 2). In that interplay relationship becomes fellowship, mutual enjoyment, in which we recognize each other’s respective “moral personhood.” This is what David Pocock calls “the significance and . . . joy of human existence.”<sup>9</sup> Whatever I was to Khodādād before we talked—*fārangī?*, *kāfir?*—he now believed that I had a moral sensibility more or less like his own. I was, in his elegant Islamic vocabulary, a *musulmān* man like him.

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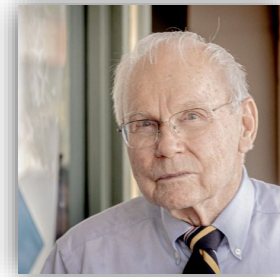
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<sup>8</sup> I take this to be what the Persian Sufi poet Jalal-al-din Muhammad Rumi, whom the Afghans know as Balkhi, refers to when he says in his *The Great Wagon*, “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I will meet you there.”

<sup>9</sup> “Moral personhood” is a term proposed by Wendy James (1988, 143); Pocock’s phrasing is at (1986, 8), (cited by James 1988, 144.)