



Among Pilgrims

By Lisa Atallah



Pastor Victor & Lisa Atallah at an Indonesian school for needy children

To get right with God, Muslims are taught to follow the 5 pillars of Islam:

1. Confess belief in one God and Mohamed as His prophet
2. Perform prescribed purification and bowing ritual Islamic ‘prayer’ 5 times daily
3. Purification by giving to charity and the needy
4. Fast the daylight hours of the lunar month of Ramadan
5. Travel once in a lifetime in ritual pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. (A city to which non-Muslims may not approach.)

Flying To Saudi Arabia

Muslims from Arab lands and around the world who desire to get right with God travel to Mecca, Saudi Arabia all the year round. Saudi Arabia welcomes visitors. The country brings in more revenue annually from hosting Muslim pilgrims than from its vast oil resources. So, to my shock, by far the most economical route accompanying my husband to MERF meetings in Indonesia was to travel on Saudi Arabian Airways, with a layover in Jeddah, the closest international airport to Mecca.

Headcover

Like Arab Christians and a few liberal Muslim women, I had traversed the cosmopolitan city of Cairo, Egypt many times freely without headcover, despite obviously being in the minority. In fact, once, seeing my gray head enter a crowded subway car, a polite young lady whose head was well-wrapped, sprang up to respectfully offer me her seat.

However, the thought of entering Saudi Arabia, the bastion of Islam among serious Muslim pilgrims purified for pilgrimage gave me jitters. Dare I go with an uncovered head? Did I want to be considered a

Muslim? No. Was it cultural arrogance or foolish pride not to wear a headcover? Afterall, in many Christian villages today women still scarf their heads. Putting a scarf in my handbag calmed my nerves. It stayed there, despite the fact that the heads of all the women and girls around me were well-covered. A very few wore a full black veil hiding the whole face. What a surprise when one of these, a mother of several children, turning to me across the aisle, in perfect English, asked to borrow my pen to fill the landing card.

Seeking God

The flights were filled with pilgrims on “Hajj”



Pilgrimage to Mecca is the 5th Pillar of Islam

“And who is my neighbour?”

— Luke 10:29

Driven To Prayer

A wave of intense sadness and love for our lost fellow travelers overwhelmed me, driven to prayer for the true living God, who so graciously saved me through faith in Christ, to also deliver these fellow passengers from empty hopelessness.

seeking to get right with God. Many clearly were on an airplane for the first time. Some were devoted grown sons and daughters gently supporting elderly parents struggling to hobble forward to make their pilgrimage and get right with God in their last days. There was a couple with a Downs toddler and whole families of all ages. Some men, women and children were dressed all in white. The men were wrapped only in a heavy white towel, draped over one shoulder, seeking to get right with God.

Before take-off on each flight, all paused in silence to hear a recording of a humble Arabic prayer translated to English on the screen. What commercial airline in the West

would publicly acknowledge the great transcendence of the Creator and humbly ask for traveling mercies?

Despite the fact that I was clearly out of step with everyone else and so got a few stares, on all flights and the transit hours in the massive, modern airport of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, staff and passengers alike treated me with kind politeness and respect.

Convicted

It wasn't until the last return flight that I became convicted for my self-centred headscarf worries, thinking about the fact that even after all their time, effort and expense seeking God, the simple folks sitting all around me

were returning home, still as lost in their sin as when their pilgrimage began. These families seeking God, live in a world where the gospel of God's grace in Christ is unknown.

Zamzam Water

We joined our fellow passengers crowding together at the baggage carousel, as 10 or 12 identical plain 2-liter containers of Zamzam “holy” water appeared among the bags, each with a penned name, one or two with a baggage tag. Then there were 20, 30, 40, more and more, I lost count of the identical packages. Anxious pilgrims patiently strained with intensity trying to identify their own holy mementos among the scores of lookalikes.



The Great Mosque of Mecca, Saudi Arabia

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International Evangelical Church

Sundays 10:30 am & 6:00 pm – John Calvin Centre
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