



Publisher for Christ on the Muslim Road

By Paul-Gordon Chandler

*The following material was excerpted and adapted by Kim Pettit from Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: **Exploring a New Path Between Two Faiths** by Paul-Gordon Chandler (Cowley Publications, 2007). It tells the story of Mazhar Mallouhi, a renowned Syrian novelist, and his organization, Al Kalima.*

His books about Jesus are not sold through Christian bookstores. They are sold, by the thousands, through secular or Islamic outlets throughout the Middle East from Pakistan to Morocco. His novels are bestsellers and his commentaries on Scripture receive critical acclaim.

How did Mazhar Mallouhi's literary career begin?

In the early 1960s, Mazhar found employment with a Christian publisher called the Arab Christian Literature Mission (formerly based in Cairo and called the Nile Mission Press), it was moved to Beirut after President Nasser's coming to power. The publishing house had recently appointed a new director by the name of Hugh Thomas, a Cambridge University graduate... Paradoxically, through their friendship, Mazhar found himself falling in love again with his own Arab culture.

As a publisher, Hugh was also in need of writers, and on learning about Mazhar's gift, encouraged him to begin to write. This was

the stimulus Mazhar needed and he began to work earnestly on his first novel. His modern-day Arab prodigal story, titled *The Traveler*, was first published in 1963 and was distributed throughout the Middle East, in Jordan, the West Bank, Iraq, Syria, and of course Lebanon. To date, *The Traveler* has sold over 120,000 copies. The success of his first novel confirmed to Mazhar that writing was an effective way in which to share with other Muslims about Christ, this treasure he had discovered.

Wanting their literary efforts to be more effective in communicating to Muslims, together Hugh and Mazhar began to reshape the publishing house, which until then had been particularly associated with the smaller Arab Christian segment of society. They made many strategic changes to help bring about this objective.

They moved the publishing house from a remote location in a Christian suburb of Beirut to the heart of the city, where all the other influential publishers, Muslim and non-religious, were located.

In attempt to broaden their market and be more sensitive to Muslims, they dropped the word "Christian" from their publishing house's name.

They attempted to be more relevant to Muslims in the titles they selected, working hard to Arabize their books' design; up to this time books from Christian publishers in the Middle East tended to be quite Western in appearance.

They soon began to build close business relationships with some of the most respected publishing enterprises in the Middle East, such as Dar Yaqada.

Piggybacking on the distribution networks of these larger publishing operations, their own distribution channels spread throughout the Middle East, enabling many thousands of their books to be made available to the wider Arab Muslim world, even to countries like Saudi Arabia. As part of the book exchange arrangement, they would in return distribute some of the other publishing houses' titles to Christian circles, including a biography of the life of Muhammad.

Hugh was undergoing a crisis at the publishing house. The Christian owners had decided that their literature company should be very clear doctrinally on what it did and did not believe. A statement of faith was drafted that all senior foreign employees were expected to sign. However, Hugh Thomas disagreed with the document, feeling strongly that it was theologically much too narrow and conservative, and decided that as the director he could not sign it in good conscience. This conflict resulted in his resignation and return to England.

A new director was appointed, an American with a very conservative Christian orientation. Soon after the new director took up the position, a local Arab Protestant minister complained to him about the biography of Muhammad which the publishing house was selling. Shocked to see that these titles existed on their shelves, the new director insisted they immediately be returned to the Muslim publisher with whom they had a partnership arrangement.

Mazhar protested this decision with all his might, which resulted in a major struggle at the publishing house. Realizing he would lose the battle, he even went so far as to suggest they burn the books rather than return them, as this would not only break the unique partnership agreement that enabled

their own books to be distributed throughout the Arab Muslim world, but it would also be considered very offensive and disrespectful culturally.

Disregarding Mazhar's pleas, the new director returned the books and the publisher cancelled the partnership arrangement, returning every one of their titles, closing the door on all their distribution channels.

So Mallouhi left the publishing house, but continued his literary work as a novelist.

While living in Beirut, Mazhar went on to write four more novels in the same genre: *Miriam*, *The Fugitive*, *The Rebel*, and *Lost in the City*. Mazhar's books were not accepted in Christian publishing houses or bookstores, as they were seen, according to publisher Hugh Thomas, as both too "spicy" and too "pro-Muslim."

Mazhar found that much of the Christian literature written for Muslims attacks the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad, seeking to alienate the individual from Islam. This literature all too often uses militant anti-Islamic language... Christians' communications about Christ in the Arab Middle East has often taken a confrontational approach, using apologetics.

Muslims rarely hear "Good News" from Christians; instead, they feel targeted as enemies in a new war... Mazhar believes, "Waging a war takes a huge effort and God doesn't need us to defend him... I want all my energy to be given to the quest to live in a spirit of openness and forgiveness."

Theologically, Mazhar increasingly became more "generous"—seeing Muhammad and the Qur'an as potential signposts pointing toward Christ. He says, "I believe that God has set his witness in the center of Islam... For me, Islam has light, while I believe Christ is the fullest light I can know."

So how did Al Kalima start?

After years of frustration with what they viewed as unacceptable literature, either offensive or irrelevant, published by Christians for Muslim readers, Mazhar and his wife Christine decided to take a proactive approach and publish, in addition to Mazhar's own writings, literature in Arabic that would shatter stereotypes, overcome prejudices, and illuminate, resolve, and explain typical Islamic misunderstandings of Christian faith by presenting Christ and his teachings in a culturally acceptable way.

In order to facilitate this objective, in Tunis in 1991 Mazhar founded Al Kalima ("The Word" in Arabic), a non-profit publishing association that publishes spiritual books of this genre and distributes them through one of the largest secular Arab publishing houses.

Passionate about the Gospels, Mazhar would often encourage his Muslim friends to read them in order to discover Christ for themselves. They challenged him to help them by publishing the Scriptures in a format they could more readily approach and understand, echoing the Ethiopian eunuch's cry in the Book of Acts, "How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?"

Thus Mazhar developed a vision for a commentary on the Gospels especially suited for Muslim readers, and in Tunis he began in earnest to work on a re-presentation of the Gospel of Luke for Muslims.

An initial systematic survey was conducted among hundreds of Muslims to ascertain the difficulties they had in understanding the text. Mazhar asked Muslims for their help in explaining Christ's teachings in a clear way to them, and all cooperated at every level, even overseeing the survey process for him. Mazhar's Muslim friends were especially honored that

he was willing to put so much effort into this endeavor for their sake.

After five years of hard work, this representation of Luke's Gospel was published by Dar al Jil, in Beirut, in 1998, with the title *An Eastern Reading of the Gospel of Luke*. A Muslim-focused publication, it includes the text of the Gospel of Luke together with a commentary that seeks to address the common Muslim misunderstandings and prejudices. It is packaged in a fashion that conveys great reverence, as Muslims are accustomed to with their own holy book, the Qur'an. The enthusiastic reception throughout the Arab World of this publication laid the foundation for the shape most of Mazhar's future literature work would take.

In 1996, while in Morocco... Mazhar also began a... commentary on the Biblical book of Genesis. Again his editorial team consisted of Muslims and Christians. Similar to his earlier publication for Muslims of the Gospel of Luke, this new venture was a major publishing initiative that would take several years to complete. Published in 2001 by Dar al Jil in Beirut, *Genesis: The Origin of the World and Humanity* became a bestseller throughout the Arab World.

The success of the Luke and Genesis titles encouraged Mazhar and Christine to work on a similar publication of the Gospel of John (the most mystical of the Gospels) for Muslim mystics, traditionally called Sufis. After several years, with assistance from Muslim and Christian scholars, and groups of Sufi mystics that helped shape and field-test the material, [in 2004] *A Sufi Reading of the Gospel of John* was published to high acclaim, obtaining outstanding reviews by Muslims and Christians alike... The annual *Arab Publishers Journal* listed [it] as one of the most significant publications of the year.

In these commentaries on the biblical texts, Mazhar does not avoid textual

criticism, something which is not allowed in Islam with regard to the Qur'an... On this approach, Mazhar comments, "This is a model for Muslims who have questions about the Qur'an but cannot ask them publicly. We are showing we have nothing to be afraid of in modern literary scholarship."

What is the aim of these publications?

To help Muslims and Christians in the Arab World understand and respect each other, and to introduce the teachings and person of Christ, whom Mazhar found to be the Middle Eastern Prince of Peace.

Under the editorial oversight of Al Kalima, which includes Christians and Muslims, they have published numerous books in Arabic, including, among many others, *The Gospel in Dostoevsky* (selections from Dostoevsky's writings), collections of Leo Tolstoy's short stories, *Blood Brothers* by [Father] Elias Chacour, and *Justice and Only Justice* by Naim Ateek.

As very few suitable publications about Christ's life for Muslims in Arabic existed in the secular market (even though Christ is such an important figure in the Qur'an)... Al Kalima published a very readable biography on the life of Christ titled *The Master: A Life of Jesus*.

Al Kalima's publications include Mazhar's own novels, works by Russian novelists Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky, Muslim-focused Biblical commentaries, books by Arab Christian writers... and titles about the Bible and Christ with the Muslim reader in mind.

"There is still one book I would like to write," says Mazhar. "I would title it *The Infidel Christian*. What I mean by the use of that title is this: if a Muslim sees a Christian walking down the street they see that person as an "infidel." This is not because of that Christian's belief (which a Muslim would not know much about) but because of what

Muslims are told about them and may have even observed themselves... [I want] to change the way Muslims think about Christians, showing this way of thinking is generally incorrect."

What is Al-Kalima's mission?

The mission of Al Kalima is to publish spiritual books for Muslim audiences about the person of Christ and his teachings through some of the largest secular Arab publishing houses. Al Kalima's publications exist to shatter stereotypes Muslims have about Christ and Christian faith, and then illuminate and explain typical misunderstandings Muslims have of the Scriptures.

This non-confrontational approach is one of its unique distinctions and strategic emphases. Al Kalima asks Muslims for assistance, and seeks to affirm the insights and values incorporated in their culture.

With the use of normal, legal distribution channels ... Al Kalima's greatest local support comes from Muslim readers. Their purchases, which are their "paid endorsements," are financing multiple reprints, besides the more important spiritual impact on the readers' own lives.

Mazhar's goal in Al Kalima is to educate influential Arab Muslims as to what Christians really believe and to enable them to meet firsthand the Christ of the Gospels.

How was Mallouhi able to secure distribution for his titles?

Mazhar's distribution philosophy and approach was shaped early in his literary career. Shortly after Mazhar's decision to follow Christ in 1959, Khalil Brieze, an intelligence officer in the military and member of the Muslim Brotherhood, utterly displeased with Mazhar's new faith, began to share false reports about him in order to discredit him. This smear campaign resulted in Mazhar being discharged from the Syrian

army in 1961, a year and a half after his Golan Heights transformation.

Several years later, this same intelligence officer led a failed coup d'état in Syria, resulting in the Syrian government offering a reward of \$25,000 for any information on his whereabouts.

One day, in 1966... in Beirut, Mazhar happened to run into this same officer... Mazhar, in the spirit of Christ, hugged him warmly, invited him to his house, and instead of returning the hardship this man had brought upon him, took the approach of love; forgiving him and in grace introducing him to other exiled Syrian political leaders also in Beirut.

Khalil, amazed at Mazhar's actions and ever grateful, opened doors for Mazhar with publishing houses of the Muslim Brotherhood, resulting in books about Christ being made officially available through their distribution channels in various conservative Muslim countries, even in Saudi Arabia.

Decades later, as a result of that early experience, Mazhar made certain that Al Kalima's main publishing partnership is with one of the largest and most respected secular Arab publishing houses in the Middle East, Dar al Jil, headquartered in Beirut and owned by Maronite Catholics. This enables Mazhar's books to be sold legally and openly through normal secular or Islamic outlets in 23 Arab countries and in Pakistan and Iran—from supermarkets in the Gulf States, to book fairs in North Africa and Iran.

All of Al Kalima's publications have been approved by government censors for sale in the mainstream market and therefore do not bear the stigma of smuggled contraband that much Western or Protestant Arab Christian-produced literature does.

Over the years, Mazhar has seen the very negative effects of smuggling... he views [it] as blocking all possibilities for the Bible to be taken seriously and naturally by

Muslims or for the Bible to be endorsed officially as a legal book, something his sales and distribution approach has proved is very possible.

Even though Mazhar has government permission to import Al Kalima publications, shipments sometimes get held up due to other Christians smuggling literature who have been caught. Mazhar acknowledges that all of this requires a long-term distribution perspective.

Mazhar... does not distribute Al Kalima publications through Christian bookstores or churches.

How does he view Christian distribution channels?

Mazhar feels that too often Christians are "quite insecure and therefore remain somewhat reserved and even hidden away." He says, "Often you will see a Christian bookshop in a remote or out-of-the-way area, not a public place. So as Muslims we have no access to see Christians and learn about their faith.

"The problem is not with the Muslim," he continues. "The problem is with the Christians—who very often feel Muslims do not desire Christ. In fact, many Christians in the Middle East don't want to share Christ with the Muslims because they feel they don't deserve him... So often the problem here in this region is that the church "hijacks" my Lord and puts **him** in their private box."

What are some of Al Kalima's current projects?

The Al Kalima publishing association has begun working to develop an interactive website for those within Islam wanting to know about the person of Christ. While Mazhar serves as the chief editor, there is an editorial team composed of Christians and Muslims, with a Sufi group assisting as well.

Mazhar's primary desire today is to make the Scriptures available to Muslims with a contextualized commentary for them in easily accessible, legally available places. His most important projects therefore focus on re-presenting the Scriptures as the ancient Middle Eastern sacred writings that they are—returning them to their authentic cultural origin.

Mazhar's most ambitious project to date is a new translation and commentary of all four Gospels and the book of Acts for Muslim readers, to be titled in Arabic, *An Eastern Reading of the Gospels and Acts*. It will be the first Arabic translation of the Scriptures initiated and guided by Muslim followers of Christ.

Mazhar and Al Kalima have conducted an initial linguistic survey of the Gospels among 1,500 Muslim readers with no exposure to the Bible from a cross-segment of society from various Arab countries. The readers were given Scripture portions of the five primary existing translations and questioned on comprehension, literary style, and their impressions... While the translation work is in progress, drafts are tested on a continual basis among eager Muslim readers.

Because Muslims see the Arabic language as both the language of God ("God's chosen medium for the Qur'an") and the cornerstone of Arab identity... Mazhar deliberately uses the literary language of Arabic, *al-fusha* (as opposed to more simplified Arabic colloquials), that educated Arabs have historically employed for formal Arabic reading and writing.

Mazhar Mallouhi's desire to contextualize the Gospel, then, affects the language, style, and content of Al Kalima's publications. Does it also impact the design of their titles?

Not only is their content exclusively oriented to Muslims, but also equally

important is their eternal packaging and the way they are distributed. The Western proverb "You cannot tell a book by its cover" is contrary to Arab thinking. To a Muslim, God's Holy Word needs to be presented in an honorable fashion that conveys great reverence and importance. The appearance of the book itself commands respect for the message. Hence Al Kalima's Eastern presentations of the Scriptures are truly works of art, in beautifully detailed hardbound volumes, printed with ornate Arabic calligraphy (in the artistic Islamic style done by a renowned Syrian calligrapher), and on par with the quality that Arab readers expect in editions of the Qur'an.

Ironically, the only criticism Mazhar has received from these re-presentations of the Scriptures is from some Christians themselves who feel that these publications, both by their "unchristian" appearance and open and respectful content, compromise their Christian faith. However, many other Arab Christians find these publications serve as a natural and beautiful gift for their Muslim friends.

You mentioned that Al Kalima is retranslating the Gospels. How does Mallouhi view the current translations of the Scriptures?

Mazhar does not endorse the few highly contextualized "Islamicized" translations of the Bible that exist, which are in a Qur'anic format that use the Qur'an's language and phraseology, as well as its rhymed prose style.

The intention of the various Christian groups that have made translations of this sort has been to improve their readability for Muslims. However, Mazhar's belief is that their attempt to imitate the Qur'an as much as possible in structure and style is acting dishonestly to the Muslim reader, as it is a misrepresentation of the way the Christian

Scriptures have historically been formatted, shaped, packaged, and communicated, and therefore, they can be seen by the Muslim reader as an attempt to mislead or deceive.

Interestingly, these Islamicized Arabic translations of the Bible have never taken root in Muslim society and some are banned, as one such publication popularly referred to as the *Sira*; just two years after its publication, it was condemned by the Muslim World League and the Islamic Research Academy in Egypt asked the then grand imam of Al Azhar to have it banned. These publications have effectively been shut out of the Arab world.

Seeing these Islamicized Christian Scriptures as not keeping integrity with both Muslims and the original Scriptural text, Mazhar does however readily acknowledge that existing translations of the Bible in Arabic have been done by Christians for the minority Arab Christian population. The terminology used in these translations can often confuse Muslim readers, for it is extremely difficult for an Arab believer from a Christian background to understand the Muslim worldview sufficiently to clearly convey the meaning of Scripture to a Muslim reader.

How does Mazhar Mallouhi promote his work?

He continues to write. Arab magazines and newspapers often publish Mazhar's articles, providing a hearing for his most important literature projects... He spends much of his time attending the primary Arabic book fairs throughout the Arab world. Not only are his books bestsellers at each of these fairs, they also provide an occasion for Mazhar to meet with publishers from other countries to facilitate distribution of his Al Kalima titles in their local markets. He frequently received invitations to visit groups of

Muslim followers of Christ, like himself, to share his experiences and years of learning.

More than 35 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 30,000 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.

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