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*"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"*

## **FAITH STORIES FROM ANOTHER CULTURE**

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Faith Stories from Another Culture

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Today I want to share with you some stories of faith from my experiences of living in Turkey for eight years where I taught at a private university and my husband was manager of a Turkish- American engineering company. While we were there, we worked with four other international couples to establish an international church where both Turks and foreigners are welcome. The relationships I developed at the university, church, and in our neighborhood and community changed my perspective of my faith and culture. I want to share stories about traditions from both Christians and Muslims demonstrating faith and hope. I hope that these stories will meet two goals: 1) you will gain a deeper appreciation of how culture and faith together impact our attitudes and behavior; and 2) your understanding of the integration of your faith and practice will be strengthened.

Years ago I heard a story about a young woman who always cut off the end of a beef roast before she baked it. One day her husband asked why she cut the roast. She replied, "I don't know, but my mother always cut her roast." She called her mother to ask the reason. Her mother responded, "I don't know, but my mother always cut her roast." So the young woman called her grandmother, "Why do you cut the end off of your beef roast?" "Oh, because, my pan was too small for a whole roast!" Like the young woman we often do things based on traditions, without questioning why. Recently a friend told me that Brazilians do not eat with their hands at all; they always use utensils. Most don't know why; they just follow the tradition. But apparently generations ago, they discovered a disease was spreading through the hands to the food, so they stopped eating with their hands: a good reason!

So it is sometimes with our faith and behavior: we may act without realizing the basis for our actions. There may or may not be viable reasons for those actions. Let's share some example of family

traditions and discuss how they might have developed: Where should a baby sleep? With parents or separately? At what age should a child learn to feed her/himself? Who should pay for the wedding: the bride or groom's family? What should parents of newlyweds give to the couple?

Differences in these traditions reflect differences between individualistic cultures and collectivistic cultures (Triandis, 1989). Individualistic cultures, like the US, focus on the importance of fostering independence in children (babies should sleep in their own crib; teenagers should be given more freedom) whereas collectivistic cultures emphasize the importance of maintaining strong family ties (babies should share the parents' bed; family picnics should include all generations from grandparents to teens). "Wait," you might be thinking, "I'm in the US, but my family is important to me." Yes, that is true. Two aspects worth noting here: first, the contrast between individualism and collectivism is not a dichotomy, but a continuum. Secondly, within a culture there are variations between families. Let's look at each of these, using examples from my experiences. First, the idea of a continuum. How important is family to you? Do you call your mother and/or grown child every day? For me, I would say that my family is important, but I don't call my grown son daily. However, several of my Turkish friends do just that. One young woman moved to the US, but she continued to call her mother daily – and this was back before Skype and other less expensive means were available. So, that mother's value of family would be stronger than mine: my value of family would be different although not opposite of that mother's value. A continuum. Yet, one of my neighbors here in the US talks to her sons daily, demonstrating variations between families within a culture. One more example reflecting the difference between individualism and collectivism: would you *not* marry the person you love because your parents do not approve? Thankfully, my parents liked my fiancée, so I cannot fully relate to this possibility, but I knew young people in Turkey who seemed strong-willed, but yet allowed their parents to make the decision about whom they would marry.

Let's shift our focus now to ways our faith traditions influence our attitudes and behavior. Sampson (2000) and Cohen and Hill (2007) contend that religious traditions have shaped our cultural values. For example, the Protestant emphasis on a personal faith promotes individualism whereas the Jewish focus on group identity and rites encourages collectivism. In Costa and Goodwin's (2006) research, Muslims scored higher on collectivistic values, Christians scored higher on individualistic values. Turkey, which is over 99% Muslim ([islamicweb.com](http://islamicweb.com)) and the US, which is 77% Christian (Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001) have been shaped by Islam and Christianity, respectively. Although unlike the grandmother's beef roast, the exact reason for some traditions may not be so easily discovered, for the purpose of today's workshop, we will concentrate on how the two religions have shaped values.

First, let's look at some similarities between Christianity and Islam. Both encourage giving to the poor and both see the value in prayer. One of the things I found interesting is the common thread of giving at holidays. Just like we as Christians, give food baskets to the needy at Christmas and Thanksgiving, Muslim Turks give food boxes at Ramadan. At grocery stores, boxes containing a variety of staple food items are available for sale. Also, for the sacrifice holiday, they give meat from their sacrifice to charities and individuals in need. For example, a nursing home where I volunteered received enough meat at that time to basically supply most of its needs for a year. Many of our friends gave money and food to their housekeepers and their families.

Prayer is important for all of us. Muslims pray at certain times of the day and with standard prayers, reflecting more of a collectivistic approach, whereas, we as Christians tend to be more individualistic in our approach to prayer: praying when we choose, but also praying together in worship (the continuum from individualism to collectivism). But, both groups pray. When my Muslim friends

had problems, they often asked me to pray for them. Sometimes, I would pray with them at that moment whereas other times, I would tell them that I would be praying.

Now let's examine the differences between Christian and Muslim beliefs so that we can a) differentiate between belief concepts and b) recognize ways we integrate our Christian faith and practice. What is the major difference between Christian and Muslim beliefs? The one that seems most salient is that Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God and Muslims believe Jesus is a prophet of God. What difference does that make in how we carry out our faith? I once read that for Muslims, God became Book (the Qur'an), and for Christians, God became Man (Woodward, 2002). We believe that God became like us, he "emptied himself" and was "born in human likeness" (Phil 2:7, NRSV). Because he was like us, we believe he understands us and relates to us. This can be very difficult for Muslims to consider and accept. One of my friends was very surprised when I said that Jesus was God's son. She'd never heard that, even though she and her husband had lived in Western Europe for a few years and had traveled around the US. The idea that God would become like us was incomprehensible to this couple. Later, the husband questioned me, "How can we as people glorify God? He's so far above us, nothing we can do can glorify Him."

How do these contrasts in beliefs influence behavior and attitudes? What values do we cherish, given our belief that God became Man? Let's consider two: love and empowerment. Persons who decided to become Christians were often very clear about the differences they perceived between Islam and Christianity. In our women's Bible study the new believers frequently highlighted the importance of God's love for them. "How could I not accept His love shown to me through His perfect sacrifice?" Muslims have 99 names for God, but love is NOT one of those names. Another related theme was the acceptance and respect Jesus showed to persons at all levels of society: women, children, lepers. The women liked how the angels appeared to the shepherds, still a lowly profession currently. Luke 14 with

Jesus' focus on not taking the best seat at a banquet and on inviting the poor and the disabled to your banquet was another favorite passage. As social workers, when we show God's love to the poor and oppressed, we are integrating our faith in our practice. The respect we give is a Christian value.

Another belief from Paul's letter to the Philippians is that God is working *in us* (Phil. 2:13, NRSV). This concept is very different than the idea that God is beyond us. People who believe God is beyond them have a sense that things are out of their hands: *inshallah* – if God wills, is a common saying in Turkey. Instead we believe we can be active in our decisions to change things. Why? Because God is active *within* us. God's love *empowers* us. To me, this is the best example of empowerment. What is empowerment? According to a social work text it is helping individuals and groups to take action, believing that they have the capacity to make their own choices (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007). Where does that concept originate? I believe that it developed from our Christian heritage: we are God's fellow workers. God loves us, we are made in His image, and by His power we act to be His ministers of reconciliation (II Corin. 5:18) in our work. What a powerful image! Our faith in God's work strengthens our practice.

In conclusion, both Islam and Christianity have influenced our cultures toward collectivism and individualism, respectively. Perhaps in our focus on our own individual faith, we sometimes we worry too much about integrating specific faith issues into our practice. Perhaps the most important ways we can demonstrate our faith is through our love, respect, and our belief that God is at work within us and within His people – the foundations of the Christian faith.

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