

GOD ALLOWS IT...

“They have painted the stone foundation orange,” Johan reported to me after checking on the house renovations. “And they painted the mortar between the stones black.”

“At least the house is not purple,” I replied. “We have friends in India who went on holiday only to come back and find out that their landlord had painted their house purple while they were gone.”

Needless to say, western and Asian colour preferences can vary widely. We had been supervising the work on our new house in Faizabad. Lois and I had asked for our new bungalow to be painted white, but the landlord had gone ahead with canary yellow. We stopped the painter halfway through his work and requested again that the house be painted white. The landlord consented, but he actually got the last word on the foundation stones.

However, the colour was not the only surprise awaiting our inspection. The painter had written “mash-Allah” across one of the foundation stones. When we saw it, we knew we could never consider painting over it.

Such an act would be a great insult, maybe even considered blasphemy.

Mash-Allah loosely translated means ‘God allows it’. Such a statement is often found on new houses. It serves several purposes. First of all it acknowledges God as the source of blessings, and rightly so. By so doing, such a phrase causes us to remember God as the giver of good gifts.

At the same time ‘mash-Allah’ can deflect a judgemental attitude in a guest. If I were to question the appropriateness of something extravagant in my neighbour’s possession, the fact that God allowed him to have such a thing, like a satellite dish, or luxury car, or maybe even orange foundation stones, should soften any criticism... and envy.

It is this guard against envy that may be the greatest motivation for writing these words on your house. A felt need here amongst a number of people is the need to ward off the evil eye. Mash-Allah can do just that. It can protect the possessors of a new house like ours from a potential disaster. If someone is jealous of our good fortune, then they may wish us ill. However, mash-Allah written on our house should protect us from such a curse.

I’m not sure how such a concept translates into our experience in the West. But I find that when I buy something nice, if I paid a really low price for it, that somehow deflects a potential negative judgement. I mean, who can resist a bargain? It’s kind of our way of saying mash-Allah without being too religious.

I’ve noticed here that if I let myself focus on the differences between the local culture and mine, I really feel like the foreigner I am. But if I look beneath the surface to universal motivations in what the local culture cherishes, I can find my own reflection in what I see.

For instance, I was speaking with our housemates the other day about how it doesn’t matter how much you pay for anything here, when you tell an Afghan what you’ve paid, they’ll say, “That’s way too much. That’s because you’re a foreigner. Next time let me buy it for you.”

Now, if that happened once or twice it might be bearable. But this happens every time you buy something. I can be walking down the street with a new item under my arm and a total stranger will want to know what it cost. I tell you this redefines buyer’s remorse.

But then this housemate said, “We do the same thing back home with travelling times: the virtue goes to the person who arrives first. And if you say, ‘I went such-and-such a way,’ your friend will reply, ‘That way is too long. I go such-and-such a way and save ten minutes.’”

I guess you could say that we value the saving of a few precious minutes in our culture, and Afghans value saving a few precious coins. For all the weird and wonderful ways things are done in this place, I think our common humanity awaits discovery beneath the thin veneer of colour preferences and how we express a competitive spirit.

I am working on career guidance with a group of high school boys. This is being conducted

in an English language course run by a like-minded organisation. Yesterday when I asked why so many Afghans want to become engineers, one student offered this response.

“My country is back and needs many engineers to progress in its development.”

“Backward!” another student corrected him.

I always have a hard time when people talk about themselves, or about others, as backward. Yes, the city I live in is isolated from the rest of the world. But as I walk to work each day, the romantic in me gazes on the hills around and thinks of how I walk in the very path Marco Polo took to China. I think of the rich traditions and highly developed culture of the people who inhabit the Pamir Mountains around me, and that within a day’s drive are some of the world’s highest unconquered peaks.

When I reflect on the history, the cultural heritage, and the awesome natural beauty of Afghanistan, the word ‘backward’ has a hollow ring to it, almost as if the speaker is somehow backward for saying such a thing.

I tried to turn the conversation away from what Afghanistan does not have to what it does have.

“There is great potential here in Afghanistan,” I said, challenging the student.

“What does potential mean?” one boy asked.

“Write it on the whiteboard,” said another.

With potential written out in bold black letters, I then began to describe what it

meant. Various ones in the room began to express what they thought the Persian word would be, while I looked upon eighteen pairs of bright eyes brimming with potential.

Walking home yesterday I was joined by a boy in the 8th class. Rightly taking me for a foreigner, he began to ask me questions in English, keen to practise on his way to a private course in English, not unlike the one I was coming from. Evidently my teaching for the day was not over.

“My brother says that I must practise speaking English. Some students can read and write but do not know how to speak English. I want to go to America one day, or England, or Australia.”

I said to him, “I’m sure you will go many places in life.”

And I knew he would. When I asked him what class he was in, he baited me: “You did not ask me what my place was in the class.”

“Okay,” I replied. “What place are you in your class?”

“I am first in my class,” was the not unexpected answer.

Halfway across the sports field we took divergent paths. “Goodbye,” my young companion said in parting. “I will see you again.”

“If God allows,” I thought. ☺

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