

DISORIENTATIONS: PART THREE

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(Edited with an introduction by Ahmed Al-Shahi)

Introduction

THE main theme of this third part of *Disorientations* centres on a discussion of Islam and education, particularly in Failaka Island off the coast of Kuwait where Peter Lienhardt began his fieldwork. Peter here makes two observations about Islam. First, he discusses the variance between Islam in accordance with the 'Book' and what exists in reality in behaviour, practices and rationale. Secondly, he interprets the role of comparative religion in the context of the observer's view of religious beliefs and practices, and that of the people he observed. Since Peter's fieldwork, tension has developed over the role of Islam in the political sphere—a situation which can be found in other Arab and Muslim countries. The majority of Kuwaiti nationals are orthodox Sunnis, a brand of Islam also dominant in other Gulf states and in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Kuwaitis are tolerant of the

This third part of 'Disorientations' follows directly from 'Disorientations: Part Two', which appeared in the last issue of *JASO* (Vol. XXI, no. 3, pp. 251-67) and to which readers are referred for further information concerning the background to the present publication. It is introduced here by Ahmed Al-Shahi, who has edited the typescript for publication and prepared the footnotes. Both 'Disorientations: Part Three' and Ahmed Al-Shahi's introduction were prepared before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2nd August 1990. The fourth and final part of 'Disorientations' will appear in a future issue of *JASO* with a further introduction by Ahmed Al-Shahi elaborating on its content and discussing some of the main themes of 'Disorientations' as a whole in relation to recent events in Kuwait.

beliefs and observances of other Muslims living in Kuwait who are not Sunnis. This is particularly the case with some immigrants who adhere to Shi'ism, a difference that could cause political difficulties—such as happened during the war between Iran and Iraq, when the Shi'a minority was sympathetic to Iran whereas the orthodox Sunnis supported Iraq. In 1989, a number of bombings were carried out by Kuwaiti Shi'ites. The ceasefire between Iran and Iraq in 1988 was received with relief in Kuwait as well as in the other Gulf states. Religious diversity is recognized by the State, which has succeeded hitherto in striking a balance between the demands of this diversity and the continuity of the ruling family's authority in the country. Based on his observations of nearly forty years ago, Peter raises many issues in his analysis that are evident in the present-day circumstances of Kuwait. This reflects his deep understanding of the fundamental principles that have influenced the thinking and behaviour of the communities of the Gulf.

AHMED AL-SHAHI

I was to see more of these offices on my return visits. For the moment, having borrowed a large tent with a great weight of metal posts and pegs from the oil company, it was time for me to hire a fishing launch and cross the seventeen miles of sea that divided the commotion of Kuwait from the quiet village life of Failaka—to exchange the horns of unpredictable cars for the brayings of unmanageable donkeys.

How absurd it seemed, after being denied access to the tents of the Bedouin at Jahra,¹ to find oneself carrying an oil company tent across the sea to erect in a fishing village. As a home, the tent turned out to be a white elephant, though its weight was real enough. Had it not been for all the metal parts, it would have been unnecessary to hire a launch. The normal thing to do was to pay the conventional single fare as a passenger, supplementing it with as much again, or any sum that seemed appropriate, on the terms of *noblesse oblige*—in comparison with the fishermen one was rich. As it was, after asking my permission because, after all, a contract was involved in hiring the whole launch, the captain took other passengers aboard. The best place to sit was the stern, the most stable position and away from the splash of the waves, so long as the weather stayed calm.

Sandals were not worn aboard the launch: everyone carried his footwear in his hand across the gangplank and put it down beside him on the deck. I was pressed to keep my shoes on, an obvious gesture of politeness to which the proper response seemed to be to insist on conforming to the custom. The same thing had happened on the one or two occasions when people had invited me into their houses in Kuwait. The two situations seemed so obviously similar that I took the

1. Jahra is a small town in northern Kuwait that serves as a customs and immigration centre.

symbolic parallel for granted: boarding a boat was like entering a house. But it was not quite so simple. Several months later, I learned that the deck was the 'mosque' of those sailing in a boat; it was the place where they prayed. As we crossed to the island, the summons to prayer was called and the sailors and passengers performed the prayer of mid-afternoon on the deck of the launch, using their head-cloths as prayer mats.²

The fishing launches of Failaka, of which this boat was one, were locally built craft equipped with diesel engines and lateen sails. They supplied fish for the Kuwait market, and this was why transport between Kuwait and the island was fairly regular. The launches were highly seaworthy, and had to be so because violent storms blew up in the Gulf in no time. In such storms, no one was so foolhardy as to put freshly to sea. These were times when fishing ceased and Failaka was cut off from Kuwait for days on end. That day, the sea was calm. One could, however, observe a distinct freshening of the weather once we had left the protection of the Bay of Kuwait. The sheltered anchorage of the bay provided an explanation of why old Kuwait had grown up and flourished in a barren land where even the drinking water was scarce and exceptionally brackish.

We landed at the village of Failaka towards sunset. The launch was pulled up on the beach and the sailors deposited my belongings above the tide-line. Except for the tent, there was not much: a couple of suitcases, two or three cardboard boxes, and a tin trunk and a packing-case that had arrived from England by sea. The packing-case contained two camp-chairs, a camp-table, a camp-bed, a pressure-lamp and a mosquito-net. In the cardboard boxes were a primus stove and some pots and pans I had bought in Kuwait. It was taken for granted that the luggage could be left unattended, and I went to see the governor. The metal parts of the tent were, in fact, to stay on the beach until I returned the tent to the oil company.

The room in which the governor conducted his business was completely old-fashioned—no administrative desk, no chairs, but low, wide cushions to sit on against the walls, and a floor covering of rugs. It was lit with a pressure-lamp. A radio was broadcasting an intoned recitation of the Koran—presumably from Iraq or Cairo, since Kuwait then had no radio station of its own. The governor smoked his clay hubble-bubble pipe and offered it round. Tea was served, followed by smoking incense. The incense lay on the top of glowing charcoal in a little clay pot, and one was supposed to inhale a little of the smoke and then pass the pot under one's beard, if one had a beard.

2. There follows a note to remind Peter to take up the symbolism: 'house is associated with women. Women are not associated with boats, except as occasional passengers. Only other association is inauspicious—the barren woman becomes fertile if she steps over the keel of a boat under construction at the price of the life of a sailor—usually the captain.' He continues, 'No one would even have allowed me to enter a mosque (which they did not like me to do anyway) with my shoes on. Palestinian Muslims were told to keep their shoes on. It was 'modern' to keep one's shoes on in a house.'

This was the governor's public room, his *dīwāniya*. In the context of administration, the word itself was interesting. It was a version, current in Kuwait and southern Iraq, of the Arabic word *dīwān*, existing also in Turkish and Persian as *divān*. Hence the English word 'divan'—the sofa made by putting a frame under the sort of sitting-cushions which furnished the governor's room. But the word was also connected with a verb meaning 'to write down'—hence *dīwān* and *divān* as words for a book of poetry, also familiar in English. Hence also, even in my Arabic pocket dictionary, the further meanings of *dīwān*: 'an office', 'a court of justice'. The *Dīwāniya* of the Governor of Failaka was, indeed, his office and his court of justice, as well as his public sitting-room.

The governor had two muscular ex-slaves as his attendants, men strong enough to enforce discipline. Failaka had no police or uniformed men of any kind. There were also present three Palestinian schoolmasters, the staff of the village school, who turned out to be the only people on the island who knew English. They were obviously there to interpret if necessary. By that time, I could manage more Arabic than the governor had expected, and we never had an interpreter again, but it was useful on that occasion to have their help because there were practical details to discuss. The headmaster explained that if I would like a house there was one I could rent at 70 rupees (£50) a month, and there was also a young man who had once been an assistant cook on a dhow who would be ready to work for me as a servant at a wage of 120 rupees a month. The headmaster added that the young man was married and would prefer to sleep at home, and so would I make this concession? The man was brought in for me to meet, and everything was settled. The governor lent me a metal bed, mattress and some matting for the floor, and I moved into the house.

I lived in Failaka village for three months of the winter and spring of 1954 and paid a further long visit in the summer of the following year. It was a village of about 3000 people, the only village on the island whose name it shared. There is probably no such thing as a 'simple' village, but at least Failaka was an easier place to get to know than Kuwait. For me, in three months, diverse experiences began to assume some vague consistency, a consistency sensed sooner than grasped intellectually. Various tentative ideas on all sorts of matters had to be cultivated and then, with regret, weeded out. A few began to grow healthily.

The house I had rented was a typical local house except for the size of the plot, which included a little date garden. From the outside, it consisted simply of a rectangular enclosure with walls high enough to prevent passers-by from seeing in. There were no windows in these walls; the whole house was oriented inwards. Inside, there were two single-storey rooms built against one outside wall, and a further, adjoining room built against another. The rest of the enclosure was a yard, into which the door of the house opened directly, with a few palms planted at the far end. The rooms did not intercommunicate; each had its separate door opening into the yard. The windows, looking out on the yard, had wooden shutters, but no glass. The walls of the house were of sun-dried mud brick, plastered over with

mud and straw. The roof beams were mangrove poles, which supported stones topped with a thick layer of dried mud to make a waterproof flat roof.

The reason why houses were surrounded by high walls and had no windows on the street was to preserve the privacy of the women. Modesty and propriety required women to avoid social contact with men to whom they were not closely related. A woman spent most of her time in her own house. When she went out into the street, she carried her seclusion with her: the walls of the house were replaced by a long black veil. The only work women did outside the house was to fetch water and to sweep the pathways around the house and keep them looking respectable. Women went out to the well together, chaperoning one another. They would also go out together to visit other women, usually relations, and sometimes to visit the graveyard and greet the family dead. Women prayed at home, not in the mosque.

The ground area of the house I had rented would have allowed for additional rooms to be built on so as to house a large family. The happiest domestic situation, people said, was to have the family all living together. Sons would bring their wives to live in their parents' house and bring up their children there. The father of the family would be master, making sure that the family lived religiously and honourably, and keeping control of expenditure. He had to be equitable, arranging that if one woman got a new dress the others got new dresses too, and not allowing any child to be specially favoured as against the rest. The mother would be mistress of the house, in charge of the cooking and domestic management, distributing the household tasks among the women and girls. Under the moral influence and affectionate discipline of the master and mistress of the house, the family would share its expenses and they would all look after one another.

My servant belonged to just such a happy family. Since I was providing part of their income, they seemed to treat me as a benefactor. In spite of purdah, I was able occasionally to talk to my servant's mother and even to meet his wife, whom the parents treated affectionately. At the end of my stay on the island, when everything was packed up to go on the launch, a storm blew up and lasted for two days. The father invited me to stay in their house, as if I were a member of the family, and there I learnt how family days began. Before dawn, the father came round calling, 'Get up and pray.' There were no greetings until we had washed our faces. Then came the greetings, 'Peace be upon you', 'And upon you be peace', 'Good morning.' My friends then performed the full ablutions (the ritual washing of their hands and forearms, feet and ankles, and faces) and individually prayed the dawn prayer, which ends, as do all the prayers, with the greeting of peace to the two guardian angels who constantly stand behind each person's shoulders.

The sight of a cane tucked away in a corner reminded me of a saying of the Prophet Muhammad familiar to everyone. He advised fathers to teach and exhort their children to pray and, if they were still dilatory, to chastise them. It seemed unlikely that the cane had been much, if ever, used in that house. They were sensible, dutiful, good-natured people between whom I never saw the slightest sign

of domestic friction. The young man was his parents' only child and the apple of their eye. He was the survivor of three sons, the other two having died in infancy. The first of the infant sons had been given the name of his dead grandfather, in order to commemorate him. When he died and another son was born, he too was given the same name, now commemorating both the grandfather and his dead brother. The second baby died and a third son was born. He again was given the same name, but the parents had now begun to wonder whether there was something inauspicious in the name as it stood. They consulted a religious teacher who wrote down a number of names on scraps of paper and, with a prayer, dropped them over the baby. One of them landed on the baby's body, a name that means 'manumitted'—not in this case from slavery, but from evils. He survived, and this was the name he was usually known by, though when he grew up he rather preferred to be known by his grandfather's name.

Religion recommended parents to get their children married young so as to keep them out of temptation. When he was about sixteen (people were never sure of their ages) his parents had found him a very pretty fourteen-year-old girl to marry. Such a young couple could not be expected to be mature enough to manage a household independently. The idea that they should live with the husband's parents made practical sense. One could also appreciate how, had there been more sons in the house, the children of the succeeding generation would be brought up in the habit of obeying their paternal uncles as well as their fathers, and so follow the traditional lines of agnatic authority. Their maternal uncles, affectionate and influential as they might be, could not demand obedience. They would be living elsewhere, authoritative and responsible in their own households.

So far, the young couple had no children—indeed, in early stages, such young marriages often have more to do with companionship and the growth of intimacy than with procreation. The family did, however, have one extra member, an orphan nephew of the father's who had come from abroad. He worked with the father as a builder. Thus, when work was available, there were three wage-earners to produce the family income in a family of five—some insurance, among poor people, against accident, sickness, or the days of unemployment.

Not all families were so happy. An old widower invited me home. I knew him because his son-in-law supplied me with water—a lowly and not very manly job. As we sat talking in the main room, my host began by apologizing: 'Please excuse this bedouin hovel of a home,' he said, 'it is all falling down.' The old man did not, however, lack patronage. He prided himself on the regard shown him by the shaikhs, for whom he had worked. He hunted under the bed and brought out a little raffia fan on a stick bearing the Arabic greeting, 'Prosper every day.' It was a keepsake the ruler had given him after a visit abroad. In a while we heard tea glasses being discreetly rattled outside the doorway by a woman, presumably his daughter, who was standing there almost completely out of sight and fully veiled. Having brought in the tea tray, the host hunted under the bed again for a tin of cake. The son-in-law joined us and did the pouring, but as a

junior, though perhaps thirty-five, he only spoke when spoken to. The household was strict.

Like his house, the old man was getting frail. His cloak of dignity had worn threadbare: unhappiness showed through, and with it the lack of forbearance whereby some of his trouble might have been avoided. He discussed 'life' and 'the world' philosophically, but when he addressed his son-in-law a petulant tone intruded. The old man talked about his son, who was not present. He had got him a wife, but she was no good in the house. The father had been dissatisfied, and the son had divorced her. He had got him another wife, and the same thing had happened again—it was difficult nowadays to find a good wife. He had found him a third wife, this time a very young girl whom he had expected to be manageable. She was the worst of the lot. He spoke of her in a calm, measured voice, but with a vocabulary quite unrelenting. She had not only been lazy and disobedient, but feckless into the bargain. He had had a terrible time with her. The last straw was when she forgot to turn off the tap of the paraffin tank and he found the paraffin all trickling away in the yard. 'What a waste! How could she be so feckless unless she was trying to be annoying?' When he criticized her, she just left. He wouldn't have minded, by that time, only his son left with her. They now lived in Kuwait and didn't even visit him. 'The world is like that,' he reflected, 'everything passes away.'

Whatever I saw of a rural tragedy here, reminiscent of some of the stories in Crabbe's poems, it was not my place to do more than hint at a tragic flaw. I wondered what the governor made of it all, and asked him. The governor expressed his opinion with inflexible Kuwaiti common sense—of course he was an old man. Being old, he ought to be wise enough to understand what life is like. A man ought to look after his daughter-in-law, and a son ought to stand up for his wife—if need be, even against his father. Otherwise, this sort of thing would happen: divorces would go on for a while, but sooner or later a girl would turn up who was strong enough to get her own way and make her husband leave home. No doubt it was a sad situation, but whose fault was it?

As the low rent of my house suggested, little of Kuwait's prosperity had so far rubbed off on Failaka. There were no public works: the only roads and paths were those worn by people's feet. Private house construction and repairs only provided employment for four or five builders, and that, spasmodically. Apart from the Palestinian schoolteachers, Failaka had no modern services, whether benevolent or intrusive—no clinic or doctor, no police or customs officers. The villagers fetched their own water from the wells. They cooked on primus stoves and lit their houses with hurricane- or pressure-lamps. At night, a simple lamp raised on a mast guided the fishing boats to shore, while one could see in the sky the diffused glow of oil gas being burnt off on the distant mainland.

I heard no suggestion that Failaka was being neglected by the government. Things were better than they had been. Those who had gone on raids on behalf of the great Shaikh Mubarak at the turn of the century had soon realized that his principle for dividing the spoils of battle was very simple: 'The great is for the

great, the middling is for the great, the small is for the great, and what is left over is for you.' The present ruler was generous and enlightened: Failaka's turn would come. People in Failaka certainly took it for granted that they had a right to benefit from the wealth Kuwait's oil produced, but the modern idea of 'the people' demanding their rightful share in the division of the national wealth was not familiar among the islanders—they were not 'the people' (*al-sha'b*) but 'the people of Failaka' (*ahl Failaka*—a totally different expression). Even for the future, no one seemed to have the unrealistic dream of a life of ease supported on oil royalties. What people hoped for was well-paid work. To demonstrate that he was not illiterate like most (he was certainly more naïve), a fisherman laboriously scrawled down the question, 'Is there oil on Failaka?' Why else should an Englishman have come there, and might he not tell a literate man the secret he had concealed from the others? If Failaka turned out to have oil too, then the people would have work at home without having to cross to Kuwait.

Kuwait had first come into being, on its inhospitable site, in the eighteenth century. Failaka could have been a practicable place for habitation ever since people had boats. In a predominantly barren area, it had a good water supply, plenty of fishing, and the security of being an island. The only archaeological evidence of earlier habitation then known was a Greek inscription found early in the century. There were, however, near the village, two long, regular mounds that looked, even to my inexperienced eye, like tumuli that would interest an archaeologist, and there was also a shrine a few hundred yards along the sea-shore. The twin mounds were called Sa'd and Sa'id, and the shrine was called Al-Khidr. Al-Khidr, 'The Green One', appears in the Koran as a holy personage, more angelic than human, who instructed the prophet Moses in the ways of divine providence. Sa'ad and Sa'id were said locally to be the graves of holy men, true Muslims from the early days of the world, when human beings were of vast size.

It was disappointing for an anthropologist, looking for something to discover, to find no significant cult connected with these places, nothing which adapted the transcendent religion to the particularities of local life. There was one old woman nicknamed 'Mother Khidr' who regularly visited the shrine and the old graveyard nearby, and though the roof had been broken down there were signs that a little incense had been burnt at the shrine subsequently. But that was all. As for the mounds, all that was said was that there were many holy men buried in Failaka, and that was why the island had no snakes. One or two people said the shrine of the Green One had been broken down because it fell under suspicion of being a place for immoral assignations when a youth and a woman were seen there together at night, though, in fact, it turned out to have been just a woman taking her sick son there in the hope of a cure. The governor said this was nonsense. Some people from the Iranian coast had been visiting the shrine, simple-minded, superstitious people as they were, but such behaviour ultimately amounted to idolatry and could not be allowed to go on. He had discussed the problem with one of the shaikhs, and they had simply taken some men and broken down the

shrine. If anyone (except, perhaps, Mother Khidr, whom I could not talk to because she was a woman) had any strong objections, I never heard of it.

There was one detail in which quite a number of the local people could be thought to disregard strict Islamic orthodoxy, though they preferred not to think so themselves. This was *zār*, the visitation of spirits. I had heard a little about *zār* from the islanders, but first came across it in practice when a young man I knew well was talking to another about the latter's personal problems, which seemed to be causing him some psychological strain. Judging by what I overheard of the conversation, carried on in low voices at the far end of my kitchen, the main speaker was becoming increasingly tactless, and the other young man was beginning to show signs of acute mental distress, to a point when I began to think I ought to intervene. At that moment, the distressed man, who was sitting on the floor, fainted and fell over. I started to interfere, but the man responsible told me not to be alarmed, everything was all right. In a minute or two the other one came round and rubbed his eyes, and my friend greeted him, 'Peace be upon you.' He went away, a little dazed but much calmer.

My friend explained that he himself was one of the practitioners of *zār* on the island. According to Islamic teaching, there are many spirits in the world, spirits originally created by God from fire. Some are Muslims, and are usually benevolent. Others are malevolent and dangerous, but it is with God alone that human beings should take refuge against them. According to *zār* beliefs, spirits 'visit' human beings and get into their heads. They cause trouble and have to be placated. *Zār* practitioners in Failaka would give the spirit incense to smell through the nose of the sufferer, who had gone into a state of trance after the lengthy singing, to the accompaniment of tambourines, of Islamic songs such as:

Repentance Lord, repentance Lord,
For my fault and sin,
Lord God, I repent.
The drinker of [forbidden] wine,
Got drunk but sobers up.
Lord God, I repent.
Now we are men of God.

Speaking with the sufferer's tongue, the spirit would ask for things—a ring for the sufferer to wear, sometimes the sacrifice of an animal, whose blood the spirit would drink through the sufferer's mouth. The drinking of blood is, of course, absolutely forbidden to Muslims, but it was not the Muslim sufferer but the spirit visitor who was supposed to be drinking it. In trying to work out the logical status of the act of drinking blood, I asked: 'Could you give the spirit the blood of a donkey?', a silly question which got the answer it deserved: 'Would *you* drink the blood of a donkey?' As far as I could discover, people mainly had recourse to *zār* in cases which suggested emotional and psychological disturbance, though one case was of terminal cancer and another was of a stroke. Far from being substitute or alternative religion, *zār* in Failaka, for those who had anything to do with it,

was more like superstitious folk medicine. The more literate and businesslike local people, such as the governor, certainly spoke of it as a superstition, *khurāfa*, and hence regrettable—but harmless as compared, for example, with idolatry. Spirit healers were not setting up equals with God. It would have been unthinkable to permit large public displays of spirit healing, such as I witnessed in the Afro-Arab circumstances of Zanzibar a few years later, but as long as it was practised discreetly in the home it was people's private business and no one interfered. Later, in another part of the Gulf, I found it was possible even for the sceptics to turn to spirit healing in circumstances of medical desperation when all else failed, practising a sort of mad empiricism as we all might.

The same sort of people were sceptically tolerant of the common practice of protecting kitchen gardens from the evil eye by hanging a few donkey skulls on the fence. They shared the opinion of the Persian poet Fariduddin 'Attar who wrote, 'You must have been born with ass's brains to hang up this ass's skull. This ass, when living, could not ward off the stick. How can it ward off the evil eye, when dead?' In the anthropology of that time, the word 'superstition' was considered outmoded, even obscurantist, and on the whole for good reason, but the word in Arabic had exactly the same meaning, and its use was part of the ethnography of the Gulf. It distinguished what one might call 'notions' from 'beliefs', just as in England it distinguishes the notion that it is dangerous to walk under a ladder from beliefs of a theological kind. It was thus that idolatry fell into a different category. In Islamic terms, many regarded such superstitious behaviour, whether of spirit healing or hanging up donkeys' skulls as, strictly speaking, 'disapproved' (*makrūh*), but idolatry was 'forbidden' (*ḥarām*) and indeed as forbidden as anything could be.

Religion in Failaka did not deviate from the 'straight path' in which people ask to be led every day as they repeat the opening prayer of the Koran. To worship God and obey Him were the essential duties of mankind. The One God was creator of all, and except for His Word, the Koran, everything else was created. God had sent many prophets to mankind from Adam onwards, including Jesus and those whom Christians regard as prophets of the Old Testament. They were Muslims. Their prophetic messages, as transmitted in the Christian and Jewish scriptures, have been corrupted by priests and rabbis. The final and greatest of the prophets was Muhammad, to whom the Koran was revealed and who was able to interpret God's will.

There had been no old Christian or Jewish minorities in Kuwait or the other shaikhdoms of the Gulf, as there were in so many Middle Eastern countries, and so people in Failaka were only familiar with these religions as mentioned in Islamic teaching. Some were mildly inquisitive about whether Christians prayed or fasted. My explanations convinced them to the contrary since prayer, *al-ṣalah*, required prostrations (otherwise it was only 'intercession', *du'a*), and a fast in which people ate and drank was no fast. One thing that did impress several people, indeed moved them, was the wording of the Christian marriage service—'for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health...till

death do us part'. The Prophet said that, of all the things that Islam allowed, divorce was the most disapproved. Christians and Jews are to be tolerated in Islam, and people in Failaka were tolerant, though they did sometimes suggest that I was being unreasonable in not obeying God to the point of becoming a Muslim myself. One homely remark indicated the construction placed on obedience, though it might have surprised the more theologically minded: 'How can you be a Christian? How can you claim that you can obey God without obeying the Prophet Muhammad? It is like saying you obey your father and don't obey your (paternal) uncle.'

One elderly man held religious instruction for adults every morning. He encouraged me to attend, perhaps in the hope that if God decreed that I should become a Muslim he would be the instrument of my conversion. His efforts at proselytism, if such they were, were tactful and indirect. I simply noticed how frequently he reverted to Islamic teachings about Jesus: after Muhammad, the greatest of the Islamic prophets; the Word proceeding from God, but still created by God; whom God saved from crucifixion by substituting a likeness of him; and who shall return at the end of the world and kill Al-Dajjal, 'the Imposter' (who in Christianity is called Antichrist). These doctrines are all derived directly from the Koran. And, as the teacher frequently mentioned, the Koran says of Christians that of all men they are 'the most inclinable to entertain friendship for the Muslims'. The teacher was too kindly to mention in my presence what was said by the great classical commentator Al-Baidawi (I quote from the notes of George Sale to his own translation of the Koran, which I had taken with me):

They add that Jesus will arrive at Jerusalem at the time of the morning prayer, that he shall perform his devotions after the Mohammedan institution, and officiate instead of the Imam, who shall give place to him; that he will break down the cross, and destroy the churches of the Christians, of whom he will make a general slaughter, excepting only such as shall profess Islam, &c.

Indeed, in the whole period I spent in the Gulf, no one whatsoever mentioned to me the ultimate destiny of Christians who failed to convert. More than once, the teacher quoted from the Koran the miraculous speech of the infant Jesus from the cradle, defending the Virgin Mary from the accusations of the people. Here in his very own words, unchanged by human transmission, was the irrefutable proof of what Jesus proclaimed himself to be:

Verily I am the servant of God; he hath given me the book of the gospel, and hath appointed me a prophet. And he hath made me blessed, wheresoever I shall be; and hath commanded me to observe prayer, and to give alms so long as I shall live; and he hath made me dutiful towards my mother, and hath not made me proud, or unhappy. And peace be upon me the day whereon I was born, and the day whereon I shall die, and the day whereon I shall be raised to life.

Far from living off his religion, the teacher spent his own money on it. About twenty men would usually attend his instruction; and towards the end of the proceedings the teacher provided us all with a simple breakfast at his own expense—an act of charity as much as hospitality. His method of teaching was to read from a classical book, adding his own commentary. He never wandered off into pedantic niceties. His main concern obviously was that people should lead good lives, and his commentary was mostly taken up with the exposition and reiteration of the duties of Muslims. His audience was illiterate and he was entirely patient with the simplest of questions, as when one man, after the teacher had spoken at some length about the *ansar* ('helpers' of the Prophet) asked whether they were Muslims, a question not all that different from asking whether the apostles were Christians. This was not a school: he was not teaching about Islam as a matter of information but teaching Islam as a religion.

During the breakfast, when conversation was general, people sometimes raised problems of their own. One day, two brothers who were having a family quarrel brought the matter up at a meeting. In such a situation, they ought first to have turned for guidance to the older generation of their family, for family matters were very private. But the brothers were middle-aged men and no one from the older generation survived. In a more impersonal fashion, the teacher took their place. He discussed the principles of behaviour and justice raised by the quarrel, quoting what God had prescribed and the Prophet had said in his reported sayings, and gave a religious adjudication. Here, in 'commanding what is right and forbidding what is wrong', he was performing one of the religious duties incumbent on all Muslims. He was also, in so far as he was able, making peace, a further religious act. Moreover, that the peace should be between brothers had an intense social relevance. Of the many stories that were read out to us, the one which emotionally moved the audience was that of Joseph. When we reached the description of how Joseph was reunited with his father and forgave his brothers for betraying him and casting him into the well, two or three old fishermen were reduced to tears.

The thing that struck me most in these meetings was the idea of the prophet Muhammad as the model of all human virtue, the most perfect of all men, the Chosen One whose face was clothed in the light of the Throne of God. At school, in so far as I had heard or read—say in Walter Scott's *The Talisman*—of the Muslims of the past, it had been in the context of war, and in that context the Muslims were not 'us' and their victories were not 'ours'. The time was far ahead when a high proportion of children in a classroom in Yorkshire might be of Muslim Pakistani origin. Since the World War that was going on at the time was that of 1939 and not 1914, we were no schoolboy jingoists. Nevertheless, as the victory of Wellington over Napoleon had distinctly been 'our' victory—a small part of our identity—so the Battle of Tours³ had been more 'our' victory than

3. Peter's note to this reads: 'The victory of Charles Martel in AD 732 against Muslims advancing from Spain, but for which, Gibbon imagined, Islam would have been taught in the universities of Paris and Oxford.'

otherwise. At Cambridge, where one learnt about the early Islamic conquests at the same time as learning about the Islamic religion, militant Islam had still been in the forefront of the mind. Some recent events had matched it. In one of those arguments at Cambridge that so often passed for conversation, one Pakistani nationalist had said: 'I don't pray, I don't fast, I drink alcohol, but when I was fighting the Indians in Kashmir, I knew that if I was killed I should go straight to heaven.' In Islam, God has many names, including 'the Conqueror', but the names that appear in the opening prayer of the Koran and are constantly repeated in everyday life are 'the Merciful, the Compassionate'. Here in Failaka, consonant with the supreme mercy of God, the mercifulness of the Prophet was a dominant religious concept.

During the religious instructions, the teacher was reading from a book entitled *Narratives of the Prophets*, an old, popular account of the prophets of Islam before Muhammad. I had read similar books in Cambridge, and so in manner and content it was no surprise. Nevertheless, hearing it read out as the only outsider in a group of believers was a markedly different experience. It formed a different perspective of the imagination. For example, in Cambridge, when I read attacks upon idolatry, the vicariousness of comparative religion had dominated the perspective—it was something taken for granted in the community in which I lived. In the community of Failaka, comparative religion was unheard of, whereas idolatry was real sin, the setting up of equals with God. Through the mouths of idols, though no one had ever seen an idol, the devil and evil spirits spoke to lead men astray. Maintained as a private idea, and one that could not be discussed, comparative religion could not be forgotten, but it became a more distant part of the landscape. Only thus could vicariousness be included in a context that itself opposed it.

Narrative of the Prophets included numerous quotations from the Koran, but the bulk of the book was made up of apocryphal detail. The following is a representative passage taken from the story of Jacob and Joseph after Joseph has been made away with by his brothers:

And it is said that the angel of Death visited Jacob, and when Jacob saw him the angel said: 'Peace be upon you, O you who seethe with anger.' And Jacob's skin crawled and he trembled with fear as he returned the greeting. Then he said to him, 'Who are you, and who has let you into this house, when I have locked myself in so that no one can disturb me while I complain to God of my grief?' And he replied, 'O prophet of God, I am he who makes orphans and widowers and he who separates companions.' And Jacob said, 'You, then, are the Angel of Death.' He replied, 'I am he.' And Jacob said, 'O Angel of Death, I conjure you to tell me, when a man is eaten by beasts of prey, do you seize his soul?' He replied, 'I do.' And he asked him, 'Do you seize souls all together or separately, one by one?' He replied, 'I seize them one by one.' And Jacob asked him, 'And is one of the souls that has passed before you the soul of Joseph?' He replied, 'No.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Do you come to visit me or to call me?' He replied, 'O prophet of God, I have come only to greet you in peace, since God,

may He be exalted, will not cause you to die until he has brought you and Joseph together.'

This narrative read as an account of what actually happened. Its immediacy was enormously enhanced when read out among men every one of whom expected his own life to end when the Angel of Death, a personal presence, came to demand his soul; and who expected shortly afterwards to be questioned about his faith by two more angels, both of whose names mean 'Abominable', as he lay in the grave, with his shroud open over his ear. It was the atmosphere of literal belief that made the difference. When one knew and internally accepted the people like oneself, one was at least half way to accepting their imagination. Such is the effect of social assimilation.

Without ostensibly raising them, the book also answered many questions of how and why, such as might occur to any enquiring mind. Why did God visit Jacob with the tribulation of losing his son Joseph? The Angel of Death asks Jacob whether he wishes to know, and then reminds him of the precise year and the precise day on which he bought a slave girl and callously separated her from her parents. According to the book, however, others, who do not refer to a story about the angel, report a different reason: Jacob had owned a cow that bore a calf, and, without pity, he had slaughtered the calf before the eyes of its mother, who stood there lowing with grief. By the time I lived in Failaka, it would have been illegal and impossible for anyone there to buy a slave girl; but every man slaughtered an animal from time to time. As he did so, he would proclaim the name of God, saying, 'God is most great: in the name of God', but he would omit the attributes that usually follow, 'the Merciful, the Compassionate' because these were not appropriate to the act. And before slaughtering it, he would offer it water to drink.

Thus, in the answers to unasked questions, the *Narratives*, like many other texts of religious learning, produced examples that taught people what was pleasing and displeasing to God, and contributed to a moral consensus. With the theme of mercy also went the theme of justice. The Koran states that when Benjamin was accused of stealing the cup that his brother Joseph had put into his sack, the other brothers said, 'If Benjamin be guilty of theft, his brother [Joseph] hath also been guilty of theft heretofore.' Though the prophets, including Joseph, had human faults, could a prophet be guilty of such a crime as theft? And yet, the Koran does not say that the brothers were lying. According to the *Narratives*, some authorities say that Joseph had once stolen an egg from the family house to give to a beggar (hence, his act was not theft but an act of charity). But others say that his mother, who was a Muslim, had told him to steal a golden idol belonging to her brother and break it. Joseph did so and cast the idol away in the street. (This was no theft, but opposition to idolatry—nor did Joseph even keep the gold.)

All in all, the narratives read out were so elaborate and circumstantial as to sound like history, a history in which God frequently spoke to his prophets and angels were constant visitors to men. This was the only history the audience had, the Failaka school being so new, except for memories of a recent period in Kuwait

and the Gulf extending, perhaps, for seventy years. It seemed that the shortness of the secular folk memory brought the prophetic past much closer. In one respect, it drew close to contemporary events. This was in respect of Israel. Since the prophets were Muslims, the neglect or rejection of their message by the Jews appeared as a lengthy sequence of offences against Islam. This was entirely consistent with what is stated in the Koran.

The teacher did occasionally remark on some of the situations of the modern world, commenting on the atheistical nature of communism or the dispossession and flight of the Arab refugees from Palestine in the war of 1948. His comments steered clear of the militant or political sides of Islam. In the context of Palestine, he said that the Palestinian Arabs should all fulfil their duties of fasting, prayer and the like, which too many must have neglected, in the hope that God would restore their land to them. He did not speak of holy war, *jihād*. One subject he never touched on was political issues in Kuwait. This may have been out of choice, but was possibly also out of prudence. Willing as they may sometimes have been to take notice of public opinion, the shaikhs would not countenance any religious 'leadership' that could offer an alternative to their own authority. Not being a Muslim, I could not without scandal attend the Friday prayer in the mosques, but I gathered that the Friday sermons were all read out of books, some so old that they included a prayer for the Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid of Turkey as Caliph. It was said in explanation that no local man was considered learned enough to write a Friday sermon of his own.

Those who attended the religious instruction were not exceptionally pious or virtuous men, any more than were the other people of Failaka. Nor were they revivalists. When I joined them as they mended their fishing nets along the sea-shore, they were discussing, joking, or complaining about secular affairs, not talking about the prophets, or the angels, or the religious law. They were normal, everyday people. In some matters where mercy might have been expected, they were far from tears: they said that if a girl committed fornication and lost the family honour, it was right for her father or brother to kill her and throw her body into the sea. This was a fishing community: people lived a hard life and they spent what little money they had on themselves and their families. But one of the necessities was to perform religious duties—to pray five times a day, to fast, to give away something in the way of alms, and to try to repent fully of one's sins. Some men in Failaka had learnt, as children, to read the Koran at the mosque school, but apart from that, the sort of teaching I have described had been the only education available until the opening of the modern school, staffed by Palestinian teachers.

Educational opportunity was no new idea in the State of Kuwait. On one of my occasional visits there from Failaka, I learnt that the first school with a claim to modernity had been founded when pearl fishing still flourished and long before oil came on the scene. It had been set up, for practical reasons, by merchants, who circumvented the conservative opposition of some of the shaikhs by naming it the Mubarakiya School, in commemoration of the autocratic Shaikh Mubarak. One

of its early teachers was the remarkable Egyptian expatriate, Shaikh Hafiz Wahba, later to become Minister of Education in Saudi Arabia, and subsequently Saudi Arabian ambassador in London. In Failaka, elementary, modern education at least offered boys the opportunity of qualifying to be clerks, of being better paid and more secure, and of spending their nights comfortably at home rather than laboriously and dangerously at sea. For the clever ones, if their fathers agreed, there was plenty of government money available to send them later to secondary schools and perhaps to the university of Cairo or of some other foreign metropolis.

The teaching in the new school was, necessarily, elementary, and did not include current affairs. I never heard whether the teachers mentioned their own opinions and experiences in class—certainly, had they been known to be persistently introducing their opinions about politics into the lessons, they would not have lasted long. As the proverb said, 'Strangers have to behave themselves.' Strangers they were, and for them Failaka was a 'backward' place as compared with Palestine. In their terms, even the religious teacher was not a well-educated man. Had they ever attended his instruction, they would have been more critical than I felt like being when he persisted in reading out the Arabic word for 'angel' (*malak*) as the word for 'king' (*malik*). But, in any case, the apocryphal part of the *Narratives of the Prophets* was not their sort of Islam. Except for alcohol, which they did not drink, they were distinctly closer to the Pakistani militant I had known in Cambridge than to the religious teacher who was now their neighbour. There was a war behind them—and another war ahead. It was now 1954, six years after the first war in Palestine and only two years before the Suez war. During the latter, Kuwait had huge demonstrations in support of Egypt, and the representatives of the Foreign Office, hitherto on good terms with the Kuwaitis, suddenly found themselves ostracised, while further down the Gulf, in the less stable circumstances that then prevailed in Bahrain, there were riots in which the Christian church was burnt down. Whatever the teachers may have kept to themselves in the classroom in 1954, they cannot have needed to conceal in 1956.