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The Fifty-Fifty Christian

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

“Come for Ramadan,” my friends urged me. “Turkey is an incredibly special place during the holy month. It is good for the soul.”

So here I am in Urfa, in southern Turkey, thirty minutes from the Syrian border; two more hours down the road lies Raqqa, the erstwhile capital of the Islamic State. The last time I was here, the Syrian civil war raged. The city swarmed with refugees. ISIS sleeper cells in Urfa were reported to be hunting down Syrian dissidents. But today it is quiet, just another sprawling, dusty city in the Middle East.

For Muslims, however, Urfa is not just any city: it is the City of Prophets, the original Ur of the Chaldeans mentioned in [Genesis 11](#). Abraham was born here. I visit his cave and see the hollowed-out rock where he lay as an infant. Across town, I peer into another cave where Job sat for many years, even while his friends mocked him and God tested his faith.

Because it is Ramadan, the day starts early. A drummer hired by the city parades down the streets at 3:30 a.m. – the call to breakfast. We must finish eating before the first light of the day and the call to morning prayer. Then long days of fasting, waiting for *iftar*, the evening meal after sundown. And after *iftar*, special prayers at the mosque, rounds of visiting friends and family, and always endless tea and sweets.

At the home of a friend, grandmother corrects my Turkish when I greet her saying, “Good evening.” “No,” she brusquely replies, “it is Ramadan. We must say *blessed* evening.” Special times call for special words.

Most nights I end up in a *dershane*, a study hall, where there are more prayers, more reading from the Quran. And then more tea as we sit on the floor and chat. My new friends are curious about why I have joined them.

“Brother,” someone asks me, “are you Muslim?”

“No,” I respond. “Christian.”

But they know I am keeping the fast. They have seen me in the mosque praying.

“Let’s just say the brother is fifty-fifty,” another chimes in.

At a basic level, Christianity is a religion of right *thinking* – orthodoxy – while Islam is a religion of right *doing* – orthopraxy. Fasting and praying are among the five basic “pillars” of Islam, and I am doing plenty of both. That is how I become their “fifty-fifty” brother.

They mean “fifty-fifty brother” as a simple sign of welcome, but for me it raises a fundamental question. What is really at stake here? It is not that I am half Christian and half Muslim; it is rather that I am only halfway to real faith. It’s not about one set of ideas compared with another, these rituals or those, our culture or theirs. It is about the depth of my faith.

Their faith seems so complete: this is the very cave where Abraham was born. This is the exact spot where Job sat. No need to consider the opinions of western archaeologists who have excavated a site near Baghdad that many experts believe is the original Ur of the Chaldeans. No reason to

weigh the scholarly work which points to Job being a wholly mythical figure, an archetype for the questioning nature of humans.

I admire that kind of faith. I am frustrated by my own skepticism. Why must I question everything? Why am I compelled to check the facts? Instead of looking everything up, why can't I just kneel down in awe like my Muslim friends and let God be God?

They sense my doubt. At one point in the conversation, someone asks, "But what do you believe, brother?"

I hesitate. "It's complicated," is the first thing that comes to mind.

"Basically," I quip after gathering my thoughts, "I'm a Unitarian with strong Baptist tendencies trapped in the body of a Jesuit."

"And what does that mean?" someone wants to know.

"I'm not even sure. I believe that God chose to come near to us by sending His son and that God chose to live among us through the Holy Spirit. But in truth, I only get glimpses of this God, only on some days and only in some places. On many days it seems these are just ideas from books.

I guess that's why I'm an Episcopalian. They are the only group who would have me, despite my confusion, even with my doubts."

"Fifty-fifty brother, when you visit us next year, *inshallah*, you will be sixty-forty."

I can only pray – pray not that I'll be a better Muslim, but that I'll be a better Christian, that my faith will deepen. And with the help of my Muslim friends, it will.



Dodd Sims in the mosque at Urfa