

Arriving home from Morocco to stories of ‘no light’ for the previous 10 days and only a meagre supply of water on one or two of them, is the perfect way to be bumped back into Freetonian reality. The practical technology shock demands an immediate concentration upon a daily, survival strategy and not a culturally rich holiday itinerary in North Africa.



Morocco was great. It was a reminder of what West Africa is and is not. However, some of the strongest and persistent features of our impressions were not one of ‘why can’t Saloneans have consistent power and drinkable water?’ but just how frequently we were connected with experiences of the Iberian peninsula and in particular, our time in Portugal. Despite having an awareness of how much the Moors and the Arabic language had contributed to the collection, distribution and supply of water in Portuguese homes, we were



still not prepared for the socio-cultural similarities. These were more evident among the men, especially those seated outside cafes, than the women, but also the school aged children, both boys and girls, wore what might be called a white ‘laboratory coats’ to attend classes, as they did two decades ago in Portugal. Beautiful, decorative tilework, known as “azulejo” in Portuguese, was to be found inside and outside, public and private buildings.

Religious differences between Islam and Christianity reversed some features of daily life. In Porto, we were accustomed to seeing women entering into the local Catholic Church throughout

the day, but especially in the morning and late afternoon. In Morocco of course, it was the men whose devotional adherence was most evident with frequent attendance at prayers in one of the



many mosques located in the vicinity.

Each day around 6am, whilst lying comfortably in bed and enjoying the stillness, it was not difficult to hear at least four separate calls to prayer, all within the same neighbourhood. Personal questions were even more numerous. How do the men choose in which direction they will move as they leave home? Is geography, parental allegiance or the theology of a mosque the determining factor?



How is attendance at prayers affected by the generational differences? And why did many mosques indicate they were only open to Muslims visitors?

From our limited stay in Morocco, it was clearly evident that interfaith relationships are different from what we encounter in Freetown. Not only were the mosques of Casablanca, Marrakesh,



Essaouira and elsewhere, invariably closed to non-muslims but the evidence of Sufi spirituality in music, dance and the participation of women

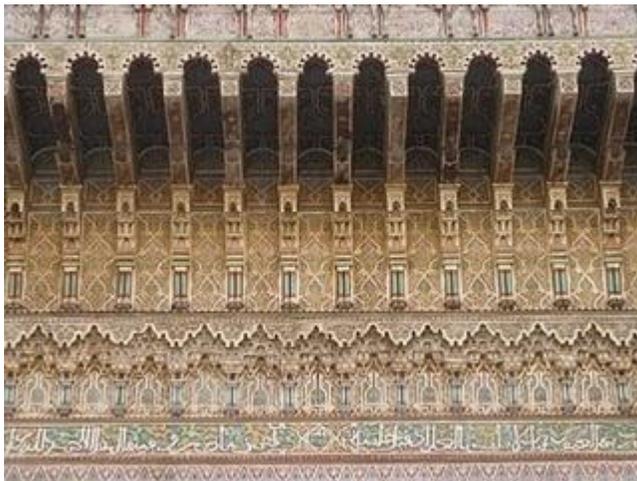


in them was also evident too. Morocco is profoundly Islamic, and whilst it had a large Jewish population in the 19th and 20th century (there was as many 250,000 before the founding of Israel 1948) there are less than 25,000 today and only 1% of the 34 million inhabitants are Christian. It was not easy to find either synagogues or churches, but we did. We found that the three large churches in three separate locations were all very different, historically and in expression of faith and devotion. But each of them, like the synagogues, had a strong police presence at their gates, but were nevertheless, clearly marked on town and city maps.

The name Foucauld also appears on many of the same maps. The French priest and hermit Charles de Foucauld spent time in both Algeria and Morocco and understandably his contribution to Catholic spirituality was well recognised in the



19th Century by colonial French culture and municipal planners. Foucauld's time in the region was a concentrated effort to discover an authentic discipleship, which eventually led to being ordained a priest in Europe. He later installed himself in a hermitage Ben Abbess in the Sahara Desert on the Algerian side of the Moroccan border. His motivation was simple. It was to seek out the poorest and most abandoned people, and serve them. "I wish to proclaim the Gospel with my life" he said; so, not by preaching or administering the sacraments, like conventional missionaries, but by his very way of being. He wanted to be Christ in the midst of people who did not know Him. To achieve this he had intended to establishment a religious community in Morocco.



With reliable stories of as many as twenty Christians being deported in the year 2010 from Casablanca alone, for alleged evangelism or proselytising, it is hard to see how anything other than mere maintenance of a personal Christian identity would be permitted today. Despite the reforms of King Mohammed VI whose Presidential powers are extensive, the country's main opposition political party has an Islamist agenda which is keen to challenge any indication of religious pluralism in the populace of Morocco. So, what would living as a Christian in Morocco require today and what would or could be a viable, personal and public identity? It was a question we carried home with us, and

were quickly reminded of how the question changes with context. As we arrived at the gate to our compound, on the last day of the year at 6.30am, we met the street-walking, megaphone-using evangelist, who was passing by. Throughout the year, on numerous mornings we have heard the distorted proclamations, without ever comprehending what he said. We discovered that he was simply compelling his listeners, who like us were greeting a new day, to give thanks to God and attend prayers in their nearest church.

We began our visit to Morocco in Casablanca and left from there too. In Michael Curtiz's film of the same name, there are numerous people arriving in the city. They each possess one of many identities, including being a refugee, but they have only one destination, Lisbon, with neutral Portugal being the gateway to North America for people fleeing the Third Reich. The years 1940 to 1941 were a tense time for the un-occupied French territories, which included the cities of Casablanca, Algiers and Tunis. Recent weeks have seen a sharp rise of socio-political unrest in the latter and as we complete this blog, there are reports of a state of emergency in



Tunisia. Morocco and Algeria also face almost identical problems, that of rising food prices, persistently high unemployment (especially among university graduates) and a desire for greater reform. It may be that even wider political changes in the region are imminent.

Today's cities of Casablanca, Rabat, Algiers or Tunis, are all seen by the European Union as buffer zones in south to north migration including from Sub Saharan Africa. The strengthening of fortress Europe against its neighbours in the south continues in numerous ways, expressing its desire to seal itself off from the forces of internationalism. The legacy and global popularity of the film Casablanca is as great as ever, with its multi-dimensional appeal, one of which may be its hugely multi-cultural cast and of its 22 speaking roles, only 3 of them are filled by Americans. And the director Curtiz, was an Hungarian Jew.



Hollywood, where in fact, the film Casablanca was shot, is not the destination of choice for those Africans seeking to head north. What they do seek is an environment that offers greater opportunities, and where each will have space to realise their aspirations, and express their own identity.

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Posted By Peter and Janice to [ClarkServInSalone](#) at 1/15/2011 05:09:00 PM