

# Sheik-ing the Towers of Faith

## Some missiological reflections on a trip to Dubai



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This article is a personal reflection on my very brief trip to Dubai a few months ago, and is intended merely to share a few cultural and missiological impressions, which in turn might stimulate interest in how, as Christians, we might engage with multi-faceted 'models', such as that presented by contemporary Dubai. My own interests in missiological engagements with postcolonialism, globalisation and 'green' issues serve as the backdrop to this brief commentary.

### Multi-cultural expressions

In anticipation of this trip to visit close friends of mine, I did my homework, so to some extent there were no great surprises. However, there is always room to be amazed, and this was most clearly demonstrated by my close encounter with that enduring symbol of human 'achievement' – the skyscraper. In this case it was the jaw-dropping, awesomely-elegant Burj Khalifa [1]. Being afraid of heights I was, on balance, pleased the tower was still unopened to the public, for it mercifully resolved my inner tension to experience the views from nearly one kilometre up in the air, with the sheer terror this would undoubtedly cause me. However, 'the Tower' draws parallels with and generates paradoxes worth exploring when considering the meaning of Dubai, [2] situated as a place of interconnection between Christians [3] and Moslems, not to mention the vast numbers of Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and the myriad other faiths and worldviews that make up Dubai's cosmopolitan population [4]. Never before have I walked through streets and shopping malls and encountered such a mix of ethnicity and social make-up. However, the apparent multicultural freedom this Emirate portrays masks, as one may suspect, deep-rooted traditional attitudes and behaviours, ever-evolving through the ebb-and-flow of cultural change.

On arrival I immediately came to understand what motivates Dubai, whilst passing through passport control. The Emirati official could barely disguise his disgust that I was not coming to 'invest' economically by staying at one of the many thousand(s)-pound-a-night hotels. To what extent is Dubai dependent on Western capital and investment, or is it propped-up by its neighbouring oil-rich cousin, Abu Dhabi, I mused, as we sped past the soaring skyscrapers lining the Sheik Zayed highway, on our way to 'Arabian Ranches', deep in desert-fronting suburbia. The lights of the night-blackened buildings twinkled in unison with the stars (if one could see past the light pollution) and I further wondered how this might serve as a ripe environmental case-study critique. Where does the energy come from to keep a place like Dubai running in turbo mode? [5] Of course, the economic toll of the recent global recession was to be seen in the dozens of luxury residential estates sitting dormant in the shimmering sands like pre-inhabited ghost-towns silently screaming for human presence to fill their chandeliered rooms; a stark reminder of the expression "over-extending oneself" came to mind!

### A clash of mind-sets

Global Capitalism may account for the nature of Dubai's image, which it projects so unashamedly to the rest of the world, but this is not a 'plastic-city' of the type one might associate in decadent parts of a secular West. If Dubai does have a soul, what does it look like? Is it an Islamicised version of Western Capitalism 'converted' by the trappings of secular

humanism, or has it remained true to its Bedouin roots, despite the resulting enormous changes in lifestyle experienced by the average Emirati over the last 40 years? Or does it represent some form of hybridity, so beloved of post-colonial critics, encompassing a hotchpotch of mixed identities and cultures? If by hybridity we mean the fusion of different 'species', (crudely stereotyping Western and Eastern traditions in this way), then it surely represents a fascinating study of how multicultural tolerance and behaviour can subsist together. This is not to say that Dubai is an exemplary example of libertarian freedoms; the Emirate has yet to bestow citizenship on any non-Emirati resident, nor does it allow unrestricted freedoms of religious expression. [6] However, it does appear to blow a few myths about the supposed inability for Christians and Muslims to live together, so unhelpfully depicted in countless media representations in the West. Dubai gives the impression of exuding the life of an alternative Middle-Eastern version of the Big Apple, rather than providing an intersection for a 'clash of civilisations'. However, the partial tolerance exercised is noteworthy, even if the motives (and the lengths travelled to protect this image, for financial and economic reasons) are questionable. Also, it should not be forgotten that the treatment of Dubai's immigrant workers has been under scrutiny in the West for some time, although more recently steps have been taken in the right direction by Dubai's ever-pleasing authorities in response to wide-spread criticism.

Human rights is a prickly subject for some Christians, who often prefer debates along the lines of 'responsibilities', but the safe-guarding of basic freedoms of expression, worship, shelter, education, and sustenance leaves Dubai facing significant indictments. In attempting to understand 'the meaning' of Dubai through peeling back the layers of a glitzy surface, the emphasis that Jim Krane [7] gives to the Sheiks' buying of loyalty from the people, is quite absorbing. Political freedom this certainly does not engender, even if pragmatists might laud such peace-creating policies. Of course, Dubai has been 'blessed' with phenomenal financial riches to shower on its people and such a successful approach is almost unthinkable anywhere else, in the current climate. This has compromised, understandably, the development of freedoms, such as speech and protest, and thus leaves the vast majority of ordinary Emirati people politically disenfranchised. Tightly-controlled citizenship and civil rights, even if the inconvenience of such restrictions is somewhat off-set by enormous material gains, are the reward for demonstrating subservient loyalty.

### **Back to Egypt? – the search for security and identity**

One dimension that particularly fascinated me was to contemplate the extent to which the liminal space occupied by the many immigrant workers, acts as a catalyst in the search for spiritual answers to their predicaments. Was slavery in Egypt (which provided a degree of sentient, if oppressive, security) better than the aimless wanderings in the Sinai desert, where the promise of new beginnings tantalisingly remained just a mirage for a generation of Israelites? What is true freedom and how is it measured? To what degree is this identity-forming challenge, a tangible conundrum facing those thousands of migrants lured by false promises and subjected to the harsh temperatures of the burning Gulf sun, whilst labouring to build a tower befitting of Mammon's increasingly ambitious aspirations? [8] To encounter stories of spiritual quests and treasures uncovered, as documented in the Bible Society's summer 2009 publication, *unburdening migrant hearts*, gave one hope to believe that God's plan remains at work during 'Egyptian captivity', as we know from the biblical accounts of the distant past.

The incongruity of the 'white sands' of ski-Dubai [9] seemed to capture the alluring impression of this oasis in the desert. Dubai's attempt to push back the laws of nature reveals the Herculean drive of the Emirati royals to stamp their culture on the world map – 'if the Americans can do it, so can we... but better, more luxuriously and more dazzlingly', seems to be the motto; if not said, then most certainly implied. Style and luxury know no limits in this corner of the globe, where wonders that no human eye has ever captured before, lurk around

every corner. The mix of Arab world music, Italian classical tenors and Western rock smooched over the sound system as the world's greatest fountain display burst into a cacophony of lights and sprays, whilst 'the Tower' gave its silent and solemn assent from way above; much as Sheik Mohammed might do from the balcony of his palace as he surveys the wonders of his Kingdom. Yet this is no aloof King tinkering from afar; he is a man very much in touch with his people. He is seen regularly strolling about in public, and personally intervening in all manner of building and development projects. He may not be their elected leader, but he does appear to be in touch with the mood of his people, or is it that none of his subjects dare challenge his authority? Leadership, Bedouin-style, is certainly not democratic as we in the West might conceive it, but, arguably, it works for them.

### **Genesis 11 revisited; reaching for the skies**

One question I could not succeed in deflecting, was to consider the degree to which 'unlimited growth' blinded the increasingly unsustainable model on which the city is based? Is Dubai just a city built on sand, or is it actually built on 'rock'? Where does the Sheik place his faith – in the ruthlessly efficient culture of Emirati leadership, in the labours of migrants and other passers-by, in the seemingly never-ending whirls of global capital flows, or in God, even? How does he reconcile his allegiance to Allah with the apparent allegiance of his Kingdom to Mammon? Is this a paradox encapsulating in microcosmic form the tensions inherent in the Enlightenment project, which, until only recently, seemed to happily co-exist? Despite Jesus' unequivocal warning in Matthew 6:24, recent history suggests that the Christian West (if not in its current incarnation, certainly evidenced by its historical heritage) has played down this warning. Sustainability (which inherently encompasses concepts of limitation and stewardship) might be a buzz-word of contemporary environmental policies, but how does that interplay with the Western concept of 'progress', which the Sheiks appear to have swallowed 'lock, stock and barrel', and with such flamboyant emphasis? God is most definitely back, according to John Micklethwait, [10] although we may wish to adopt a rather more cautious tone to the global spread and influence of American-style faith. It might be that the folly of Genesis 11 is being replicated in its starkest form, building on the numerous 'towers of Babel' that have been popping up with increasing regularity, as nation pits against nation in the race to build the tallest structure that might fittingly extend into the skies. "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth", has probably been uttered a number of times since the era of Genesis 11. It is the nations of the world that have come together in Dubai to erect the latest and grandest tower of Babel; how ironic!

### **Colonial legacies**

A further accusation that has been levied at Dubai centres on the apparent terrorism that routes its way through its more liberal pathways; [11] be it money laundering, gem-stone trafficking or weapons distribution. It would be crass to make judgements on this when we can hardly plead innocence to the trafficking of harmful products and the exportation of imperialism throughout a murky aspect of European history, namely the colonial era, and which has left such a scar on many nations of the Global South. Is the West in a position to take the moral high ground on the complex and thorny issue of organised violence? It was Frantz Fanon who argued, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that the colonised had the right to exact physical violence on the coloniser, since it was the coloniser who had initially exerted oppressive force on the colonised through organised and legitimated Government – sponsored actions. Decolonising the mind was the task of postcolonial engagement; far more difficult and time-consuming than driving out Imperial armies. Modern-day conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq remain at the centre of such ideological dialectics.

Two wrongs do not make a right, of course, and this is where Walter Wink's articulation of Jesus' third-way approach in *Engaging the Powers* (brilliantly enunciating creative and peaceful responses to injustice) provides a constructive methodology. However, the complaint often heard from the mouths of Global Southerners is the apparent hypocrisy of Western dealings and its patronising (not to mention colonial, or to be more correct, neo-colonial) attitudes furnished through the halls of the mighty institutions of Western power. The legacy of the Bretton Woods summit, namely the IMF [12], the World Bank and the WTO [13] remains dubious in the eyes of many non-Westerners. The rationale for the existence of these institutions was not necessarily wrong, although closer scrutiny in our increasingly critiquing culture is unveiling many a can-of-worms. Just as an increasing scrutiny of RBS demanded by a culture requiring greater accountability in traditionally-secretive sectors, many forms of protest and resistance are natural (and often, healthy) forms of providing appropriate checks and balances to the seemingly, ceaseless march of Western neo-colonialism. Condemnation of acts of terrorism is the right judgement to call, but how often do we indulge in sobering self-reflection and deliberate on the complex reasons that lie behind such acts of brutality, often carried out in retaliation? Retaliation for what, exactly, we might ask?

### **Conviction v. Fantasy**

What does this have to do with the Gospel? Well, actually quite a lot. Christianity is a Gospel of grace (not the cheap variety) that seeks to demonstrate, through word and deed, *agape* love. We are in the 'business' of building *for* the Kingdom as Tom Wright is so careful to articulate. [14] This means doing away with the sense of superiority we have so carefully assembled over the last couple of centuries, and which is perpetuating a form of social and economic Darwinism. Instead, we must start (if we haven't already begun the process) to listen to the voices on the margins, giving heed to those who have been excluded from the inner circles of the privileged. Are we really in a position to cast judgment on Dubai's moment in the spotlight? Is it that we are jealous of the phenomenal growth (derived by an uncanny ability to spot opportunity and driven by risk-assumption, not risk-aversion) and success that Dubai has basked in, even if that gloss has become tarnished of late, thanks to the economic downturn? If we are honest, much of our criticism towards Dubai is perhaps indicative of the realisation of the heights from which we have fallen, as a Western civilisation.

However, I do wish to reiterate that the 'fantasy factor' which seems to sum up Dubai's aspirations resonates true. If one is blown away by the scale, magnitude and achievement of Dubai as it stands today, the measure of its aspirations and proposals for the future are on another scale altogether. This is most notably demonstrated in the burgeoning concept of Dubailand [15] and the plans (now scrapped) to build a tower twice the height of the Burj Khalifa. [16] If that happened one might be forgiven for thinking that God will need to visibly re-intervene. Once again, reminiscent of times gone by as "nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them." [17]

### **A robust faith**

Dubai is situated at a captivating juxtaposition of 'East meets West'. How that will be managed is yet to be seen. However, the relative peace [18] and tolerance of a cosmopolitan and semi-hybrid culture is evident, and whether some notions of Dubai will come to symbolise any existing constructive dialogue between the two largest and fastest growing World faiths, is yet to be fully realised. Its plans to construct "the World" project [19] might be seen by critics as Dubai's desire to become a focal point of all that is truly global (and 'one') – either positioning itself as *the* global hub, or perhaps, more likely, as a reflection of a limited attempt at cosmopolitan 'world' governance. Either way, such plans may yet be scuppered if

allowance has not been adequately factored in for rising sea levels; a present and future moral to the parable of the wise and foolish builders. [20]

On what basis is faith 'constructed'? How high does it aspire to reach? Where is it placed? If misplaced, does it lead to global domination and pride? Can it be divisive or might it lead to oneness in God's globe?

Such questions face Dubai in these uncertain times – what answers will it give?

## Notes

[1] "Burj" meaning "tower". The tower was originally known as the Burj Dubai (see <http://www.burjkhalifa.ae>)

[2] "Burj Khalifa is the Arab world's tribute to the art and science of modern engineering and design. Burj Khalifa symbolizes the aesthetic unison of many cultures – from Arabia and the rest of the world." – is how Mohammed Alabbar, Chairman of the tower's chief construction company, Emaar, describes the vision of the tower (<http://www.burjkhalifa.ae/the-tower/vision.aspx>)

[3] There are more Europeans and Americans domiciled in Dubai than local Emiratis

[4] The majority of the population is made up of Indian and Asian migrants, who have provided the bulk of the human capital behind the construction of the city

[5] The energy required to keep the Burj Khalifa functioning apparently equates to that of a small city

[6] Christians may worship in a 'public' building, but places of non-Islamic worship are carefully prescribed by the authorities and indentured on land far from the hub of the city-centre

[7] Krane, J., (2009), *Dubai – the Story of the World's Fastest City*, London: Atlantic Books

[8] "At the peak of construction, over 12,000 workers and contractors were on site every day, representing more than 100 nationalities" - (<http://www.burjkhalifa.ae/language/en-us/the-tower/construction.aspx>)

[9] See <http://www.skidubai.com/ski-dubai/resort>

[10] Micklethwait, J., and Wooldridge, A., (2009), *God is Back - How the Global Rise of Faith is Changing the World*, London: Penguin Books Ltd.

[11] Krane, in *Dubai*, articulates the unease, both within the United Arab Emirates, as well as beyond, to the capitalising of this lucrative industry by Emirati officials. The recent case of the Hamas leader hunted down and shot in Dubai adds weight to these fears

[12] There are many documented cases whereby the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has been accused of levying restrictive and damaging practices on developing nations through the implementation of structural adjustment programs

[13] Again, power has resided firmly in the hands of Western nations through the World Trade Organisation, especially when it comes to conceiving and implementing the terms of international trade

[14] Wright, N.T., (2007), *Surprised by Hope*, London: SPCK

[15] For Dubailand, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2mlfegMI2o> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhviadJbGDE> for tasters! Whether such astronomically-ambitious ideas will ever materialise is highly doubtful

[16] The Nakheel tower; see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DL55rejfmSw> for an idea of the proposed scale of this now-abandoned project

[17] Genesis 11:6

[18] Krane, in *Dubai*, notes the unease and growing discomfort of the Emiratis' vulnerability to their demographic reality. With similar parallels to the paranoia of Pharaoh towards the gathering strength (yet remaining a minority amongst the Egyptian populace) of the Hebrews, the Emirati population of Dubai is outnumbered by 7 to 1, with significant implications for national security

[19] See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eUcRjo9Yv4>

[20] Luke 6:46-49

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