

## Kingdom Yeast: Agitation and Transformation by Steve Henderson

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I'm eight months back to the States after 15 years in Asia. My wife is still in Shanghai, finishing important ministry tasks there. I teach cross-cultural and personal witness courses to future church work students in Minnesota. A few months back, missing my wife, I tried my hand at baking bread--an attempt to recreate the goodies she would take warm from the oven. The attempt flopped, and I ended up with an inch-thick brick in the bread pan. Then I thought of yeast--those little single-celled organisms, cousins to fungi. To make the dough rise on that worst of all baking days, I needed yeast.

But yeast also promotes fermentation, that state 'of agitation or intense activity,' as Webster puts it. He notes the term also refers to a 'transformation of an organic substance,' like hops and malt and barley into beer.

The Twin Cities are unique in the number of refugees and others from around the planet they have invited in and cared for. I've heard it said that over fifty languages are spoken and every religion practiced within a few miles of the university where I teach. I encountered Buddhism and Animism most often in Asia, and I'm now spending time with Somali men who extended an invitation to talk about God and Allah and Jesus, Islam and Christianity, after their evening prayers.

Very respectfully, we've encountered our common roots and our different takes on everything from Abraham to Christ. I've thought about the Word as yeast, the way God kneads himself into the lives of people and raises his children up to his high calling. As I spend more time with my new friends, I've also begun to realize that *relationships* are yeast too, especially when we think of these little fungi's second role, that of agitation and transformation.

"You teach our children and wives and our men English. This is very good!" Emir tells me. "It's a pleasure," I tell him. "I'm learning so much." "What are you learning?" I tell him about the folk stories one teenager has been sharing with me and tell him my American version as well as the Chinese adaptation.

"What do you think about the problem with taxi drivers in the city?" The newspaper reported that a Somali Muslim, a taxi driver, refused to allow a man into his cab. The man was carrying several bottles of alcohol with other groceries, and Islam prohibits alcohol. Who is right and who is wrong, Emir asks? We talk about the tension and balance in a society where individual freedoms, religious rights, civic responsibilities and public services mingle freely and often collide.

"You Christians say Jesus is God, yes?" "Yes we do." And even though he knew the answer, his eyes went wide with alarm and he shook his hand at me.

"No, no, no," he whispered. "Born of a virgin, yes, a great prophet, yes, a great teacher who will return again, yes. But God? Never! How can this be?"

We talked more about the common stories about Jesus in the Qur'an and the Bible. We talked and smiled and explored differences of opinions and came to a natural stopping point.

"Ah, America. So strange and incomprehensible, like you Christians. So close to us but so

distant,” he said.

We talked a minute about why that is true. Even though it’s comforting to suggest that we People of the Book, we Jews and Muslims and Christians, share much in common, the view that Jesus is the Messiah and is God is a reality over which it is easy to stumble in one’s search for the truth and the way.

“I am glad you come to my home. I am not so young any more and it’s so cold. Mogadishu was never this cold! Please come again. Maybe next time you will tell me about grace.”

We’re not to the leavening part yet, but our relationship is causing some agitation, some transformation--in both of us. That Emir says no to Jesus as God but wants to know about grace is incredible, for I can’t introduce the one without the other. I’m fascinated to get inside Emir’s mind and heart and his devotion to repeated prescribed daily prayer. As a Christian, I’m freed from such dictates. Still, as I listen to his love for prayer and how it draws him in, I wonder if there is something he might teach me about it – *not the object of my prayer* – but a sense of happy devotion, of regularity and intention.

You see, a fermenting relationship changes everyone involved. From distance and separation it creates closeness and understanding. It brings the unknown into view and creates clarity and respect. It offers possibilities where none existed. Yes, yeast leavens, raises us up from within. But it also ferments, changing perspective and perception and transforming hearts and minds with an introduction of our good friend Jesus. ■

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