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From Karbala
to Calvary

By
Barakat Ullah

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*S. Gillespie
D. Ullah, 1977*

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In 1891, on the seventh of the month of Muharram, I was born into a Shi'a Muslim family in a small town called Narowal, now a border town of West Panjab, Pakistan. Our family was respected by the whole community for its integrity of life, piety and strict observance of religious rites and ceremonies. My grandfather was never called by his name, but was always referred to as *Janab*. He and the mosque were almost inseparable. I can still recall sitting on his lap after he returned from evening prayers and hearing him recite the Qur'an. My grandmother was so pious that many women asked to be buried near her grave with their heads towards her feet. One of her brothers emigrated to the sacred city of Karbala, where Imam Hussain, a grandson of the Prophet, was killed and is buried.

The daily routine of the family began with morning prayers and recitations from the Qur'an. As a child of four years, I was sent to Sayyid Sa'id Shah Sahib to learn from him the Qur'an by heart, while his daughter taught the same to my sister. The duties of the day ended with the night prayers.

Such was the atmosphere of the home in which I was brought up. When I was still only four years old, I was sent to the mission "indigenous" school and soon afterwards was promoted to the higher elementary school. Christian teaching was imparted in both these schools. The teaching of the Bible was taken seriously and it was considered in some respects more important than the teaching of secular subjects.

In the lower classes I studied from a book written in Panjabi which was called a catechism. This contained in an elementary form the differences between Hinduism and Islam on the one hand and Christianity on the other. In the fourth standard I was taught *Khas Ayat* (Selected Verses) which consisted of one hundred verses from the various books of the Bible. This, together with the questions and answers of the catechism, are still fresh in my memory. When I reached the fifth standard, we were taught the Gospel according to St. Matthew in Panjabi written in the Persian script. I had a good memory and by this time I knew the Christian Scriptures better than many Christians. I do not remember a single year in which I did not receive the first prize in Scripture.

My father, Shaikh Rahmat 'Ali, was a man of wide sympathies and was tolerant of all religions. His friends included Hindus and Christians as well as Muslims of all groups. He was a business man, but found time to read the Bible as well as the Qur'an in the mornings. Persian poets and prose writers were his favourite authors. His younger brother, Uncle Muhsin 'Ali, was, on the other hand, a strict and bigoted Shi'a who had no use for any religious book other than the Qur'an and its Shi'a commentaries. He was a matriculate, a rare qualification in that small town in his day. He had a good library which contained books refuting Christianity and Hinduism as well as various other groups in Islam.

When my uncle saw that I won Scripture prizes every year and could recite many verses from the Bible, he thought it was time that he took my religious education into his own hands, and he gave me some books to read. I was about twelve years old at the time and was studying

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in the sixth standard and reading selections from Sa'di and Firdawsi, so that I could easily read and understand the books that my uncle gave me. One book in particular called *Zubdat al-Aqawil fi Tarjih al-Qur'an 'ala al-Anajil* had a great influence on my thinking. It contained comparisons between the teachings of Islam and Christianity, alleged contradictions between the various passages of the Bible and specimens of higher criticism of the Bible. Armed with it, I used to meet Christian missionaries, padres and church workers when they were preaching in the bazaar, as was the custom of the day. I confronted them with various questions and constantly made a laughing stock of them.

Thus encouraged, I read more books belonging to my uncle. I still have his copy of *Zubdat al-Aqawil* in which in the margin of one of the pages opposite a passage from the Gospel according to St. Matthew (ch. 16, vv. 21-23) is written in my boyish hand: "So 'Satan' is the 'Rock' of Christianity!" Under the influence of such anti-Christian books I burnt a copy of St. Matthew's Gospel. I was reading by the light of an earthen lamp, when I applied its flame to this Gospel account and burnt it. My mother was horrified at what I had done, but I assured her that it was only a copy of the *Injil* (Gospel). Her cry brought my father into the room, and on discovering what I had done he reprimanded me severely. He asked me how I would like it if a Christian were to burn the Qur'an. When he saw the look of horror on my face, he quoted Sa'di: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you." My uncle also came into the room. He dared not say anything before his elder brother, but later he assured me that the deed was a meritorious one.

The month of Muharram is a sacred month for Shi'a Muslims, as Imam Hussain was killed in that month. Every year, a fortnight before the beginning of Muharram, the boys of the community used to band themselves together and go in procession through the streets, beating their breasts and chanting: "Hussain, Hussain, Hussain, Hussain! Shahid-i Karbala* Hussain!"

On one occasion we called a reciter from Lucknow who brought with him a small rod with about a dozen small sharp knives attached to it, with which he lacerated his shoulders. In a fit of wild frenzy I seized it and began lacerating my shoulders with it until it was snatched from my hands by one of my mother's cousins. This event increased my reputation as a zealous and pious boy.

Another event of my boyhood indelibly written on my mind is that of Christian workers preaching in the bazaar, one of whom was a Mr. Thomas of the U. P. He was preaching near a dyer's shop, when suddenly the dyer, Sikandar, a big burly Muslim, appeared on the scene. As he approached the preacher, he spat on his face and slapped it. The people who were gathered around expected a fracas, for Mr. Thomas, too, was a strong man of fine stature. What we saw amazed us. The preacher took out his handkerchief, calmly wiped his face and said: "God bless you." Then he continued to preach as if no insult had been offered him. The dyer went back to his shop sheepishly. The conduct of Mr. Thomas on that occasion made a great impression on all. It staggered me, as one of my pet objections to the Gospel was that the teaching of the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount was impracticable, against human nature, and therefore unacceptable.

* Martyr of Karbala

When I passed the eighth standard, I was sent thirty miles away from home to a mission high school for higher studies. In this school, too, I carried off every Scripture prize annually. A Muslim boy, Nur Muhammad, wanted to become a Christian, but I successfully persuaded him to renounce his intentions. I came to be looked upon as an authority on matters of religion by students and teachers alike. I haunted the places in the bazaars where Christians preached the Gospel, bringing about disorder in their meetings by asking them awkward questions and generally making them the objects of ridicule.

The city where the high school was situated was notorious for its vice, and I did not, and indeed could not, escape contamination. I was in my adolescent period, a most impressionable age. The atmosphere of the school and of the hostel where I lived was tainted with vice. This atmosphere accentuated the sense of sin in me, and *I felt the need of forgiveness of my sins and restoration to a life of virtue and goodness.* I went to the nearby mosque regularly and said my prayers, asking God to release me from the power of sin and from slavery to the devil. But I seemed to get no response. No amount of the reading of the Qur'an, nor the recital of verses, nor the saying of prayers gave me any relief. My sense of guilt increased daily. "What shall deliver me from my sins?" became my oft-repeated cry. I went to the mawlawis whenever I had free time from my studies. I studiously avoided the company of students who had evil minds and sought a different kind of company. I sat at the feet of great Muslim divines and scholars of the city and listened to their expositions. *But all the while this sense of sin never left me. It gnawed at my heart continually.*

Then came the turning point in my life. At the end of the school year I went home to carry the joyful news to my parents that I had passed the ninth standard with flying colours, standing first in my class. Travel in those days was by road. My face was wreathed in smiles as I entered the town; but I sensed a gloom over everything before I even reached my house. I found my Uncle Muhsin standing in the doorway. He took me aside and told me that my father had been converted to Christianity, and that the whole town was mourning the fact, for my father was the president of the Anjuman-i Islamiyya. I went, or rather staggered, inside.

My father was not at home, but my mother, two sisters and two brothers, who had also been converted, rushed to me and took me in their arms. I forgot the melancholy events in the joy of meeting them. My uncle came into the room, called me away from them, and said: "From now on you cannot be a member of that family of infidels. I shall adopt you as I love you more than I do my own children (which was perfectly true). I shall educate you and you will have no difficulty of any kind." I replied that, although father had become a Christian, I would continue to live with him as a good Muslim and render obedience to him as a son in all matters right and lawful. When father returned home, he was glad to see me. But my heart sank within me when I saw the lines on his face caused by the persecution of his townsmen. He was overjoyed to hear the answer that I had given my uncle.

After a couple of days I was called to a council of the elders of the town in the house of my future father-in-law, who took me by the hand and swore on the Qur'an that he

would be responsible for my education, if I did not follow my father's example and become a Christian. I told all assembled that, while I had no intention of forsaking Islam, I did not intend to forsake my parents who, as they well knew, could not possibly have embraced Christianity through any ulterior motive. They said that they had no cause to doubt the sincerity of my father's motives, but at the same time they could not sit still and calmly see their president turning into an infidel; hence they had to make some efforts to defend their religion and their community. I said that I regretted this and pointed out that they were speaking an untruth and offering me bribes to remain in the fold of Islam!

That same night I had a heart-to-heart talk with my father. He told me that he had not communicated the news of his baptism to me for fear it might upset me at the time of my examinations. He had been searching for the truth for the past twenty years and had at last found it in Christ. He was naturally glad to hear from me the decision which I had communicated to the elders. His calmness, dignity and the patient loving way he bore his sufferings and the awful persecution to which he was subjected made a great appeal to my mind, I therefore resolved to read the New Testament again to see what had attracted my father in it. I have written about the conversions of my father and his elder brother, Ihsan Ullah (who later became the first Archdeacon of Delhi), in my Urdu book *The Wise Master-BUILDER of the Panjab Church*.

I gave my father *Zubdat al-Aqawil* to read and he gave me a few books, some of which, notably *Sweet First Fruits*, were a great help to me. He advised me to go to the

missionary who would answer my objections. To this I readily accepted. I walked two miles daily to his house during midday when the temperature was 112 degrees in the shade, as that was the only time convenient to him. I found that he had only a very superficial knowledge of the Qur'an and could not even understand the objections written in *Zubdat al-Aqawil*.

When my father heard from me the futile arguments that the missionary had to offer to prove the truth of the Christian faith, he himself began to direct my studies. The books he gave me to read included Pfander's *Balance of Truth*, Tisdall's *Muhammadan Objections to Christianity* and those by Imad al-Din, a great and learned convert and the author of many books and a translator of the Qur'an. I read them very carefully and pondered over their arguments. Though I cannot give the reasons in full detail here, yet it became clear to me :

1. that there was no foundation to the claims of many Muslims that the Bible had been corrupted; 2. that God, whose very nature is love, is our Heavenly Father, as the New Testament portrays him. He has revealed Himself as Heavenly Father supremely through Jesus the Messiah, His eternal Word (who is also called His Son in the same way that He is called His Word); 3. that Christ was sinless, while the Qur'an admonished Muhammad to ask forgiveness for his sins. Consequently, Muhammad's life could not be held up as an ideal for the world; 4. that, though the Qur'an contained many good moral precepts, it did not tell me how I could become free from the slavery of sin and become a new man. The Prophet of Islam was a moral teacher but not the Saviour of the world. He claim-

ed to be a prophet like other Jewish prophets. But nowhere does the Qur'an expressly state that he was a mediator between man and his Creator.

The chief obstacles now in the way of my baptism were the questions regarding the Trinity, the Divinity of Jesus and the Atonement. My father gave me other books which were too learned for me at that time; so I was told to accept these tenets for the time being as articles of faith, just as I accepted the existence of God. A deep study of the life of the Messiah and of Muhammad inclined me to follow my father and to accept Christ as my personal Saviour. *Of all the prophets, Christ alone had conquered sin as shown by the power of His Resurrection and, therefore, only He could save me from my sins, of which I was all the time conscious.*

The Cross of Calvary, on which Christ died, became meaningful to me. In that the Lord Jesus had lived and died because of my sins, Himself being sinless, I could see that God had loved me and forgiven my sins, as Christ had loved and forgiven sinners. At the time of my baptism on July 7th, 1907 I felt that the great burden of sin was lifted off my shoulders. Oh, the joy! The conviction that I had been forgiven brought peace and harmony into my life, and I felt like one flying in the air — an experience which was new and strange and even now totally unaccountable to me. I only know that this actually happened in my life.

I was only a boy when I came to experience the forgiveness of sins and the new life in Christ Jesus. Looking back on my Christian experience these many years, my heart is full of thankfulness for God's unmerited grace.

Advancement in knowledge and years, with the resultant widening of my outlook, has increased the reality and depth of my Christian experience. It has only deepened the conviction that the only hope for lost humanity is the living, crucified and risen Christ. Deliverance from sin and restoration to a life of virtue and goodness are found in Him alone, as I discovered.

My prayer goes out for my Muslim brothers and sisters that the joy of salvation from the grip of sin may be theirs also through the Saviour of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, who came to seek and to save the lost.

Barakat Ullah



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About the Author

Born to Muslim parents in 1891, the author embraced Christianity at the age of sixteen. Taking a Master's degree in Philosophy in 1914 from Lahore University, he served as a lecturer in Edwardes College, Peshawar, and Forman Christian College, Lahore until his ordination to the ministry in 1923. He was the first archdeacon of the Amritsar diocese carved out of the Lahore diocese, which he was a canon before the partition of the sub-continent. He retired in 1956. After that, he served on the staff of the Henry Martyn School of Islamics, Aligarh, U.P. He is also the author of a number of books, among them three volumes on the authenticity and reliability of the Bible and the Gospels, others on various objections generally raised against Christianity and on the comparison between Islam and Christianity.

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