

HEIRS OF THE PROPHETS

An Account of the Clergy and Priests of Islam,
the Personnel of the Mosque and “Holy Men”

by

Samuel M. Zwemer, F.R.G.S.
Professor Emeritus of the History of Religion and Christian Missions
Princeton Theological Seminary

Copyright © 1946

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CONVERTS FROM THE CLERGY

HERE are some examples which could easily be multiplied. Dr. Imad-ud-Din was a leading *sufi* and theologian in the Punjaub. He was appointed to preach against Dr. Pfander in the royal mosque at Agra; he read the Scriptures, believed and was baptized, and with another great theologian and *sufi*, Safdar Ali, became a missionary to his people. Afterwards he received a doctorate from Oxford University. His baptism took place New Year's Day, 1868, together with his aged father and brother. Other distinguished converts in the Punjaub, such as *Imam* Shah, were also from the clergy. 89

Mullah Said of Sena, Kurdistan, came from a line of noted theologians. “For seven generations his forefathers held ecclesiastical positions.” At the age of six he could read the Koran. At the age of fourteen he wore the turban of a mystic order. Through reading the Scriptures and the friendship of a Persian pastor he was converted. “He became the noblest Kurd and was destined to be a John the Baptist for his race.” One may read the story of how he suffered persecution and afterward became a leading Christian physician. 90

In Turkey there are also outstanding examples of conversions from the “clergy.” Karl Gottlieb Pfander's life gives instances even in the days of the old regime. 91

A more recent instance is that of Johannes Aveteranian, originally Mehmed Shukri. His father was a Mohammedan *mullah* in the vicinity of Erzerum, and was a man who could not be classed as ordinary, either in his everyday life or as a *mullah*. He was of a type found among Christians, Mohammedans and Jews: namely a seeker after God, and as such followed the Dervish order (the *Joltashi*), believing that in searching always he would find God.

After his son had completed his course of Mohammedan theology, the father set out to cross Armenia and Mesopotamia, resting at times in caves, and inquiring here and there of Moslem leaders, where he could find peace with God. His journey proved fruitless, and he returned more unhappy than he started. During this time his son had become a Moslem preacher in a village not far from Erzerum.

The father left home again to seek a well-known *sheikh*, but broke down as a result of the efforts of these long journeys. His son was sent for, and on his deathbed the father related all the tragic experience of his life. Mehmed Schukri listened to and took very much to heart the sad story of his father.

Armenian Christians gave him a New Testament, which he read, and the more he read, the more he was drawn to Christianity. Thus at his father's death his faith in Christianity became stronger, as he realized the failure of Mohammedanism in his father's life. Then he began to introduce Christian principles into his Friday sermons, but this did not last long, as people began to realize that he was half-Christian!

He was obliged to escape as his life was in danger. He stayed for some time in different places in the heart of the mountains, between the two sources of the Euphrates, and the towns of Erzingan and Harput. When he felt unsafe even there, he fled as far as Persia, and thence to Tiflis in the Transcaucasia. Once safe here, he wanted to be baptized, in order to show openly that he was a Christian.

He met here for the first time his great colleague in missionary work, Pastor Amir-ghanjanz, who was at the height of his work in Tiflis. He realized the sincerity of Mehmed, and baptized him with great joy, giving him the name of Johannes Ave-tarianian (Son of the Gospel). After that, Avetarianian attended a Swedish Mission School, from which he was sent by the Swedish Mission to its mission in Turkestan, Persia and Asiatic Russia. His principal work was done in that part of Turkestan which now belongs to China.

Here he carried on preaching and writing for ten fruitful years. For many years he published a weekly religious journal for Turks under a German Mission in Bulgaria and also a large collection of spiritual letters "Witness to the Truth." He died during the last World War and was buried at Wiesbaden. 92

Both of these outstanding defenders of the faith addressed their messages and devoted their lives primarily to winning the religious leaders of Islam. Nor was their effort fruitless.

Among the many thousands of converts from Islam in the Netherlands East Indies, a goodly portion came from the clergy-class and from the mystic orders. The same is true in Bengal and China when one scans the roll of the Church of Christ. A number of these suffered persecution and some martyrdom for their faith. One Egyptian wrote from prison in Cairo, "hour by hour the conviction grew upon me that Christ was being glorified by my small sufferings."

Here is the story of Mirza Ibrahim of Iran told by Dr. J. Christy Wilson (*Moslem World*, July, 1944):

"He lived in Khoy, a city northwest of Lake Urumia, and was finally taken to Urumia and there put in jail. Later he was removed to a prison in Tabriz. His case gained some notoriety and one day the Crown Prince, who lived in Tabriz at the time, called him out of prison. He was hastily cleaned up and ushered into the royal presence.

“The Crown Prince said, ‘Mirza Ibrahim, I have heard your story and, though I think you are very foolish for declaring yourself a Christian, I do admire your courage. So today I intend to give you a great opportunity. If you will kneel here and do the *namaz* (the stated Moslem prayer) you may go, you are a free man.’

“Mirza Ibrahim took a Gospel from his coat and replied in a beautiful way, ‘Your Royal Highness, I know that you have the power of life and death over me, but here in the gospel I have found my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and new life in Him. Nothing that you could do, sir, could take away from me the life that I have found in Him. But as to doing the *namaz*, I regret that I cannot perform the Mohammedan prayer because I am not a Mohammedan.’

“He was put back in jail and several days later was strangled by the other prisoners because he would not deny his Lord.

“He was taken out and buried in a little cemetery in the middle of the great city. Some of us knew where his grave was located and used to visit the resting place of this Christian martyr. A few years ago the whole cemetery was leveled off and a great municipal building was constructed on the spot. Today it is the highest edifice in Tabriz, with a great clock up in the tower that chimes the hours to be heard by the whole city. To many of us who know that this building stands on the exact spot where Mirza Ibrahim, the Christian martyr, was buried, it is like a great monument to him.”

But his real monument is the evangelical Church of Tabriz and of all Iran.

The Rev. Paul Erdman of Syria writes:

“In 1943 there died in Beirut in a Home for the old and incapacitated, a dear friend, Sheikh ‘Asia A — whom I knew intimately for years and visited often. He was of the descendants of the Prophet and of a prominent family in Jerusalem where he was the hereditary head of the *Awhaj* (Religious Foundation) of one of the mosques. He had given up absolutely everything one would hold dear for the sake of following the Lord Jesus Christ — his comfortable home and income, his family, his position of influence and honor and respect, for he knew it would mean certain death for him to remain in his own city and country and become an open follower of Christ, and he was not satisfied to do otherwise. He attained this strong and fearless faith solely through his study of the Bible, taught of the Holy Spirit, without even any converse with a Christian. An American missionary lady living in a house belonging to the *Awkaf* one day gave him a copy of the gospel. He placed it in his pocket and went each day for a walk outside the city walls, lest the attention of others be drawn to him, and he would read . . . He continued this custom for about eight months. He would take time to read carefully in order to understand as fully as possible the meaning and to meditate deeply on the sayings of Christ.”

Another outstanding example was the conversion of a *Sufi* Moslem in Calcutta born in 1897, the child of a skilled worker in gold embroidery. He was called Fazl-ur-Rahman, “the Grace of the Merciful,” but his parents gave him an additional name by which they always called him — Abd-us-Subhan, “the servant of the Holy One.”

He was brought up along simple and puritanical lines “under the tender care of a very affectionate mother, . . . a loving father and a good elder brother,” and Islamic principles moulded his life; as a child he was indeed fanatically devoted to his own religion.

He has himself described the change that came in his life in *How a Sufi Found His Lord*, published by the Lucknow Publishing House. He tells that the aspiration for a higher knowledge of God was rooted in something deeper than any outward circumstance. “It was, in fact, God’s search for His lost child which found a response in the depth of my soul and took the form of a quest for something unknown.”

He traces its origin to the study of the Koran itself, in its testimony to the books of Moses, David, and Jesus, and the desire to know what their teachings could be. This desire was but one among other vague but eager longings which led the lad to an intensive study of mysticism.

“But one of the most memorable landmarks in the outstanding events of my life came when a copy of the gospel was given to me by a Moslem friend who himself had received it from a preacher or a colporteur. On a previous occasion I had torn it into pieces, for when, attracted by its title ‘*Injil*,’ a term with which I was familiarized by the study of the Koran, I had taken it to my teacher, I was warned in all seriousness not to read it, because it was not a true *Injil* of which the Koran testifies, but a corrupted form of it, and consequently containing blasphemous teachings; the very act of pronouncing its words pollute the mind and soul of a believer.”

However, on this occasion Subhan read it, and, though alert to detect anything wrong, “I did not find a single sentence or a clause which in any sense could be interpreted as blasphemous or satanic,” nor anything that could be regarded as an interpolation or corruption of the original revelation.

He was impressed with the high ethical teachings of the gospel, and in the story of the crucifixion found a narrative which “completely contradicted the idea of the gospel being corrupted; it is no matter of pride to be a follower of one who was shamefully put to death. Yet how plainly the story of the crucifixion refuted the Christians’ claim for Jesus to be the Son of God!”

He read the gospel through again; “it spoke to me in my own mother tongue, whispering to me the secrets of God. Its reading was comforting to my soul, every sentence touched it to its very depth and it roused the slumbering faculties of my soul to a new state of consciousness.”

After his baptism and grievous persecution, he became a teacher in a mission-school, then a preacher and only recently was consecrated as bishop of the Methodist Church. His brief autobiography is an illustration of the grace of God and is an inspiration to all who read it. 93

Today his life’s ambition “is the evangelization of Moslems. Conscious of my limitations to realize the vision I am confident that He who has begun the good work in me will finish it. At every peak of new experience I find myself exclaiming O unsearchable riches of Christ.”

The first convert baptized in the north-west frontier province of India was Hajji Yahya Baqir, a *seyyid* from Central Asia. He was a learned *mullah*, descendant of the prophet and a man of culture. Warned of God in a dream at Medina that he must follow Christ, he traveled to Peshawar and learned the truth from Dr. Pfander in 1855. He made a bold confession with joy. A few days afterwards he was murderously assaulted in the Church Missionary Society compound, received severe wounds but recovered to return to his home in Central Asia where he held fast to his faith and witnessed for Christ “as a wandering medical missionary who prayed over his patients and they all got well.” 94

As in India so in Iran, the conversion of “priests” led others to Christ.

This very year a missionary reports from one of the sacred shrines of Islam in Iran:

“At Qum we had a wonderful time. A shop-keeper whose shop faces the Mohammedan shrine came and asked to be baptized. He was once a bookseller and while going through some books came across a Bible and by reading it was interested in the Christian faith. He saw us last year and we had conversation and this year I had the joy of baptizing him, the first convert in the shrine city of Qum.”

Makhail Mansur and Kamil Mansur were brothers from a village in upper Egypt, and both studied in the great school of theology, Al Azhar, the former for twelve long years, until he became an expert Sheikh in all the learning of Islam.

Through providential contact with one who gave him the Gospel of John, he became eager for truth and light which was not in the Koran. Like Saul of Tarsus he was blinded by the light of the glory of Christ’s face in the New Testament. At the home of Dr. Andrew Watson in Cairo he heard the call and was baptized and became an able evangelist in Cairo. How well I remember the weekly meetings (1919-1928) crowded with Moslem shiekhs and students where he lectured on the Integrity of the Scriptures, the Marks of a True Prophet, and especially a remarkable series on Incidental Evidences for the Deity of Christ.

He often received threatening letters but never lost his boldness as an apostle of the truth. His mantle fell on his brother, Kamil Mansur, also an Azhar Sheikh and baptized with his spirit. On his deathbed he charged this brother, after his own eighteen years of faithful service, to take up the same ministry. He is a leader in the Egyptian Church today. 95

Such converts by their life and death challenge the Church — and Islam. Even as Stephen’s martyrdom brought Saul to reflection and finally to conversion on the road to Damascus — where he saw Another Face that shone like an angel (Acts 6:15; 9:3), so we may yet see the day in Moslem lands when as in the days of the apostles, the word of God will increase, the disciples multiply, and a great company of the priests become obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

This book was not primarily intended as a missionary study. But it is addressed to missionaries as well as to the general reader for obvious reasons, and we may say as Dr. James Thayer Addison did in his recent historical study of *The Christian Approach to the Moslem*:

“This book is written to help us approach with more realism, more intelligence, and more enthusiasm one of the great tasks which God has set before His Church for the generation to come — the conversion of the Moslem World.” 96

And that conversion, or better, evangelization of the wide world of Islam will doubtless be best accomplished in God’s time when He raises up, as today in Iran and India, many “*heirs of the Prophets*” as Christian evangelists. For God is choosing those that are “poor as to the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the Kingdom which He promised to them that love Him.”

These converts are not merely heirs of Islamic learning but “**heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ**” if so be that they fill up the measure of His suffering in the fearless proclamation of the eternal Gospel.

It is for this very reason that we dedicated our volume to them and their successors in admiration of their faith and courage.

89. *History of the Church Missionary Society*, Vol. II, pp. 561-572.

90. *The Beloved Physician of Teheran*, by Isaac Yonan.

91. *Moslem World*, Vol. XXXI; 217-226.

92. *The Moslem World*, Vol. XVII; 375 ff.

93. *How a Sufi Found His Lord*, Lucknow Publishing Co., 1942.

94. *History of the Church Missionary Society*, Vol. II, p. 12.

95. For an account of his life and work by James G. Hunt, see *The Moslem World*, Vol. IX, pp. 19-24.

96. P. 7

~ end of book ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
