

Encounter with Folk Islam (2)

Bishop John Subhan was himself a Sufi (Muslim mystic) before he accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and became a Christian. In his book **Sufism: its Saints and Shrines** he devotes a chapter to the subject of the veneration of saints. He wrote: *“The belief in Awliya, (singular wali, literally ‘a friend’ saints is common among Muslims, and is a direct outcome of Sufi teaching. While the Sufis, in virtue of being God’s chosen people, are looked upon as the elect of the Muslims, the saints, in virtue of being God’s ‘friends’, are regarded as the elect of the Sufis. The biographies of these saints, their miracles, their teaching, and legends concerning them, are not merely sought out and eagerly studied, but their names and more popular sayings are on the lips of about 70% of the followers of Islam. People of every class among the Muslims invoke their names in hours of distress, and pilgrimages are constantly made to their tombs and shrines. In fact, there are many Muslims who pay more attention to the saints than to the obligatory duties of their religion.”* (page 103)

We have to bear in mind that Subhan wrote his book in 1938 and revised it in 1960. It was written with *“Special reference to India and Pakistan”* as the subtitle of the second edition shows. However, things do not seem to have changed that much. Father M Geijbels of the Christian Study Centre, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, wrote an article in the July 1978 issue of **The Muslim World** (Vol 68 No 3) on *“Aspects of the veneration of Saints in Islam, with special reference to Pakistan”* Geijbels writes *“Examining the religious attitudes of people in Pakistan, we notice that they can roughly be divided into two groups: ‘the people of the mosque’ and ‘people of the shrine’. Those in the first group are predominantly rational and traditional in the manifestation of their religious beliefs and practices. They generally adhere, at least theoretically, to the articles of faith and the fundamental practices of the ‘five pillars’. The members of the second group follow their emotions more readily than their reason, and show a lack of concern for orthodoxy or orthopraxy. The distinction obviously should not be applied too rigidly, since life cannot be divided into watertight compartments. Yet it cannot be denied that shrines and saints occupy an important place in the life and devotion of many people in Pakistan . . . Pakistan is covered with shrines . . . The shrines in Pakistan are either of deceased saints, places where a living saint resides, or a combination of the two, because the actual, living pirs are often considered to have inherited their ‘sainthood’ from their forefathers, who are usually buried in the same premises where the present pir resides or holds court . . . In popular belief, the power of saints is very great. They can perform miracles (karama, plural karamet, literally ‘favour’) . . . “*

Geijbels then goes on to describe one of the most popular shrines in Pakistan, that in Golra Sharif near Islamabad. The pir’s name is Sayyid Ghulam Muhyi al-Din Shah. After the daily qawwali (musical recital) visitors are given a meal. *‘People come from far and near, even some from abroad, especially at the time of the ‘urs of a pir, the annual celebration of the day when he achieved his wasl (union) with God. Some visitors spend several days at the shrine and use this opportunity to receive religious instruction. The pir of Golra Sharif near Islamabad has a few mawlanas who perform this service for the people.’* Geijbels also gives a detailed description of the shrine at Nurpur Shahan. He records *“One day I visited the shrine . . . a lady asked me to fetch*

her some garlands. The request surprised me, for ladies do not usually address strange men. I complied with her request, and in answer to some questions on my side a conversation developed in which I learned that she was taking the garlands home, to place on a copy of the Qur'an. She came to the shrine fairly often, she said. 'You see, Sir, I am an ordinary woman. I approach Allah through the saint, whenever there are difficulties in my life. The saint is more powerful than I am, and so far all my requests have been heard.'"

Geijbels concludes *"It seems that the saints fulfil a three-fold function in the religious needs of the people, namely teaching (irshad), intercession (shafa'a) and the bestowing of blessings (rahma). While pirs impart religious instruction to their followers, it is our impression that this instruction is mostly restricted to an inculcation of the elementary teachings and practices of Islam, and that they do not often engage in profound theological interpretation or spiritual counselling. When, on one occasion, we asked a pir whether he would be willing to answer some theological questions, he replied 'Please consult my mawlana (theologian).'* It seems, then, that although people consider their pir also a murshid (spiritual guide), many pirs feel ill at ease in this role."

Murray T Titus in his book **Islam in India and Pakistan** (revised reprint 1959) has a chapter entitled *Saint-worship* (pp 137 – 152). He writes *"To be sure, there are groups, such as the Wahabi reformers, and the ultra-orthodox, and those of western education who have cast all this aside, but to the masses belief in saints, and their ability to grant requests, fulfil desires and perform miracles is still a real positive, and practical belief. . . . The belief in the miraculous powers of saints to help and to heal covers almost the whole category of human need The graves of saints are visited by litigants seeking victory in law cases; by the farmer who has lost his horse, by the woman who desires a child, by the father who seeks healing for his sick boy, by the merchant who desires prosperity in business, by the hunter who wants a lucky day, by the gambler and even the thief. (p 138) Titus mentions Shaykh Saddu "who has votaries throughout India and Pakistan, particularly among women. The legend goes that he was an Arabic scholar, with occult powers, who used certain verses of the Qur'an for magical purposes, by which he is popularly supposed to bring the Jinn under his control There is another ceremony similar to the zar, or 'black mass', so common in Egypt, which is known as the Bakra-i-Shaykh Saddu. This is celebrated in order to drive out his spirit, and to keep him away from women and children. This ceremony of exorcism is observed by the slaughter of kids and goats. Then there is a feast, which is sometimes accompanied with music and dancing, and by the recital of poems composed in commendation of the virtues and excellences of the Shaykh. Oftentimes women 'possessed' by the Shaykh are taken to the place of the performance, which, they imagine, will instantaneously cure their sufferings."* (p 148)

I have quoted at length from Subhan, Geijbels and Titus as they are authorities in these matters. However, from my 27 years of living in Pakistan, and from wide travelling in the Middle East and North Africa, these observations are confirmed in my mind. In June I visited a shrine in Pune, India. I met the guardian of the shrine and his family. I removed my shoes and entered the courtyard of the shrine and saw the tomb of the saint decorated with flowers. On Thursday evenings I observed that many women came to the shrine, sometimes bringing their children. I questioned some of the women and found that they came every Thursday, brought by their men folk. I visited another shrine a few miles out of Pune. Hundreds of people came to it every day. The saint had died many years ago and was buried there. We were able to go into

the courtyard in which his tomb was built. The tomb itself was enclosed in a small building. Men could walk around the tomb, and enough of it was visible for women to see it from the outside. There was a nearby spring which was said to have magical and healing power as a result of the power of the saint. The saint was also said to be able to perform miracles (karamat). We were shown one of these supposed miracles – the raising of a very heavy stone weighing about 20 kgs by five men using one finger each. Before lifting the stone to a height of about four feet they prayed to the saint, calling on his name. I suspect the feat could be done by natural means; however, it looked very convincing, and certainly many of the locals regard this as a miracle.

Practically all Muslims agree that the power to perform miracles (karamat) is a blessing of God. In the hospital in Pakistan where I live, most of the patients have first sought healing through religious and supernatural means. They will go to pits or other religious practitioners to obtain amulets. Often a verse from the Qur'an is written on a piece of paper and put inside the amulet. The power of the sacred language (Arabic) and the divine words themselves are believed to give blessing and it is believed healing. If eventually the healing is not given, the religious practitioner will give permission to the patients to go to the Christian hospital and say that after a few weeks they will be healed. In such cases the credit for the healing still goes to the religious practitioner unless the patients see some clear demonstration of God's power in the Christian community. Sometimes they do see the power of the Holy Spirit working through his servants, and this leads them to enquire more concerning the way of Christ.

A recent example of this in the town where I live is that of a young man belonging to the Christian community who seemed to be demonised. He was in a terrible state, and went to Muslim, Christian and Hindu leaders who prescribed for him in different ways. In the end, after much prayer by some Christians, and a special service in which prayer was made for his deliverance, he was changed, delivered and greatly blessed. His joy and peace were evident to all and this was news throughout the town and even beyond. In the Gospel according to Mark (Mark 16 vv 17,18) Jesus Christ in commissioning His disciples refers to the signs that would be seen: *“And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”* The Acts of the Apostles is full of case histories which illustrate these verses. *“They went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it.”* (Mark 16 v.20)

Let us look more closely at the way the Muslim who is involved in popular religion regards his pir. As I have already noted, the pir has the function of a worker of miracles, an intercessor, and a teacher in this order of importance. As Christians we have been hesitant to engage in a more public ministry of intercession despite all that the Bible says on this subject. We rarely expect miracles, and so they do not happen very often. We put our stress on teaching Biblical material but we often do this in a very Western way. Our teaching would be sought after and listened to if it could be seen more clearly that God answers our prayers and does miracles through the community of those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

In October, a small group of people met for a seminar on Folk Islam, in Karachi. We discussed the role of living pirs to whom people go for guidance, prayer, healing and some sort of blessing. Some times some people come to regard some of the followers

of Christ as Christian pirs. Our western background causes us to react against such a concept. We did consider what might be a valid role for a Christian pir. Our western background, with its stress on individuality and democracy, its scepticism (as well as over-fascination) regarding the supernatural, and its dislike of appearing “holier than thou” had greatly influenced us. We all agreed that holiness of life is vitally important, and that we should be both manifesting the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives and using the gifts of the Holy Spirit, where appropriate, far more. To quote from our report: *“Our Western background has also influenced most of the Christian Seminary and other theological training on the sub-continent. These seminaries generally include little teaching on practical dealing with folk Islam, power encounters and the supernatural, especially where these matters relate to spiritual warfare. Often evangelism is taught as a logical presentation of a series of facts, and Christ’s method of story-telling, real life examples and power encounters have little place in training the church leaders.”*

If Christians living in Islamic communities or in close contact with Muslims were known to be more prayerful, and prayed more for and with Muslims, especially in the exercise of a Christian healing ministry, more of Christ’s power might be seen and recognised.

Let us look at some practical suggestions, taking the **three main functions** of a pir:

Intercession.

Christians often seem to be slack in prayer. Some friends of mine who live in a Muslim section of Karachi and have only Muslim neighbours find that all through the day people drop in and it is difficult to have family prayers regularly. They are experimenting with a set time, place and form of family prayers in the evening. If a neighbour calls at that time, he or she is invited to join in or wait. A Christian college Principal of my acquaintance who worked in a strongly traditional Muslim city always had his morning devotions in public view on his front lawn, every day. He was greatly respected for this. I would like to suggest that we should develop more forms of private and public worship and intercession. When groups of Christians deliberately pray with or for others for specific matters, and this is known and God answers, He is glorified and people come to make known their needs, problems and fears. If the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is seen as a God who heals, delivers from evil powers, gives peace in crisis, and demonstrates his power in answer to believing prayer, Jesus Christ may be accepted as the greatest of living pirs. The Muslims who so often visit shrines are looking for a visible object of worship (the shrine itself) and a mediator between them and God (the pir), and are seeking compensation for a lack of a personal relationship with God. Christians who show in their own lives the power of the Holy Spirit can convincingly point to the living Christ as the true answer to these needs. As a result of miraculous signs and a clear answer to prayer they will then join in listening to teaching or will request it.

Blessing.

One helpful book on this subject recently published is **Blessing in Mosque and Mission** by Larry G Lenning. (William Carey Library, 1980). The author examines the concept of “baraka” in Islam and Christianity. He notes the power of blessing that Abraham received from God. Jesus of Nazareth was one on whom rested the blessing of God and who shared it so abundantly with others. As Peter said at Pentecost: *“Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders*

and signs which God did through Him in your midst as you yourselves know – this Jesus you crucified . . . but God raised Him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for Him to be held by it.” (Acts 2 vv 22-24) The Holy Spirit anointed Jesus Christ for his three-fold ministry of preaching/teaching, healing and service. Power and blessing were demonstrated. The church has now received the responsibility – and the anointing – for this ministry. Luke 4 vv 18, 19. In his sixth chapter, Lenning describes ways through which blessing is communicated – through the spoken word i.e. through benedictions, greetings and beatitudes; through sacred acts eg laying on of hands, healing, ordination, imparting the Holy Spirit; ritual meals; anointing. Later Lenning warns that “the church must be careful to distinguish between blessing (Baraka) that has its source in God, and animistic Baraka. This is often difficult because both types carry the connotation of power. While this may seem to be an obstacle, it can become an opportunity, because ‘popular’ Muslim’s sensitivity to power may impel him to accept the blessing of God in Jesus Christ and discover new and eternal life” (pages 113,114). One looks in the book for practical help and finds a little at the end: “A strong emphasis on the impact of blessing within the liturgical realm of the church can help it re-integrate and re-interpret the Gospel in ways which will attract Muslims to its message.” (page 125) “The blessing of God can be communicated through greetings, prayers and praises, the ministry of the word and benedictions. Sacramental rituals are also potent forms of communicating blessing. Other rites of blessing also need to be incorporated into the liturgical life of the church; rites that bring the blessing of God to individuals and families at crucial points of transition and crisis.” (page 126) Lenning argues that the Christian church has through worship, ritual and liturgy many opportunities for giving the blessing of God. “Some important occasions are seasonal prayers for the planting and harvesting of crops, prayers for rain, and other specific needs. These prayers and rituals will indicate to Muslims that God, through the Christian Church, is concerned that His people have a life filled with Baraka.” (page 132)

Always the request is for more practical suggestions and experiments. I do not have time here to give more detailed suggestions, but maybe in the Question Period we can discuss practical matters.

Teaching

More thought also needs to be given to the type of teaching that should follow clearly answered prayer. What are we going to teach about our prayer-answering God? What passages of Scripture should be used? What would be the outline for a series of lessons for those who enquire because of what they have seen as answers to intercession by the Lord’s people? If somebody is delivered from the bondage of evil powers, what teaching should be given? How can the void be filled? What questions are the amazed witnesses asking? How can the interest aroused through the power encounter be used as the basis for teaching? When someone has been delivered from Satan’s bondage it is necessary that they learn how to stand firm and resist the attacks and counter-attacks of Satan. A series of lessons on the Kingship and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ; studies on the power of his name, his blood and his praises are appropriate. We need to work out, and test material that would seem to be relevant.