

**INTO THE LIGHT:
THE LIBERATION THEOLOGY
OF STEVEN MASOOD, A CHRISTIAN EX-MUSLIM**

By Duane Alexander Miller¹

1 Introduction

I have proposed that the local or contextual theology of some Muslim Christians is one of liberation. It is a theology that does not tend towards systematization, but rather praxis and wisdom. Its forms of expression are apologetics, conversion narratives, and poetry. Theological knowledge is understood in this liberation theology not as ‘certain knowledge’, but rather insight into the difficulties of dealing with practical concerns in daily life that the MBB will probably face. As praxis, it is a demonstration of *how* to do certain things and a deep conviction that this theology (knowledge of God) expresses itself in *doing* at least as much, and probably more so, than in *knowing*. In the case of this liberation theology the fundamental practice that expresses the knowledge of God is nothing less than evangelizing Muslims (and encouraging others to do so). But evangelism is not the end goal in and of itself; what is hoped for is a transformed society, one where the dignity of each person is affirmed and religious choices are respected. This is far from the situation in the Muslim world today, and increasingly so in the West where the Christian ex-Muslim is almost always subject to ostracism and ridicule at least, and perhaps imprisonment, beatings, and execution as well.

I propose that these themes resurface again and again in the literature written by the ex-Muslim Christians and I wish to apply these categories—liberation, wisdom, praxis, etc.—to a specific conversion narrative in a fairly detailed manner. The volume is Steven

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Masood's 1986 *Into the Light* (Kent: OM Publishing). I will give a short summary of the book and then explore how Masood employs these themes in it. Finally, I will try to identify some of the elements in Masood's book which are unique to it.

2 Life and views of Steven Masood

Steven Masood was born Masood Ahmad Khan. He tells of his childhood in a strongly Ahmadiyya town in North Pakistan. His childhood was in general unhappy it seems. His father had other wives and was not able to provide very well for Masood and his sister and mother. Masood's insatiable thirst for knowledge and understanding undergirds much of the book and is the driving force behind much of what he does, including many things that get him into trouble. Thus he remembers even at age ten wondering why Muslims had to pray for the Prophet, if the Prophet was such a blessing to the whole world (18). He recounts his early experience of being Ahmadiyya and how Sunni Muslims would call them pagans and unbelievers. His questions as to why this was happening often went unanswered. It seems like Masood spent much of his time reading, and one day on a friend's bookshelf he saw the Gospel of John which had been given to him by some local Christian sweepers. Masood was surprised to find this book in his language rather than Arabic: *why is written in Urdu and not in Arabic, our holy language?* he asks (31). He gets to know some of the local Christians in his town, including a pastor who gives him a New Testament.

One of the recurring themes in this book is how religious figures and his family deal with his search for knowledge. By his teens Masood had been exposed to Ahmadiyya Islam, Sunni Islam, and Christianity, and he had formed a sort of research program that compared the teachings of those three communities. The most common reaction to Masood's questions was to be told to be quiet, obey, and believe. This was hardly satisfying to him: 'I felt a little exasperated

with the elders of the mosque, for they saw all my questions as bad!' (53).

When Masood does not accept his father's command to go and study at the Ahmadiyya missionary college (the Ahmadiyya Muslims have a strong devotion to *da3wa*) he is threatened with death by his father. His father relented on the murder, and took him to see an Ahmadiyya scholar (visits with scholars are a recurring theme in this book), who is still unable to answer his questions. After attending church again the pastor gave him a book about the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement, and this gave the young man fodder for his next encounter with the religious expert. For example, did not Mirza Ghulam Ahmad call himself God and say that he was greater than Muhammad? He had the references ready too. (Once it became known that this material had come from the Christian pastor he was beaten by local youth at the bus stop and told he could not enter that town again). After that meeting he felt that 'once again I had received no light, no help and no useful advice' (60). As demonstrated by the title of the book and the names of the penultimate and ante-penultimate chapters (which both reference light), it is clear that the author is intentionally stressing this Johannine theme relating light to truth and truth to salvation.

After one confrontation with his father, Masood is nearly killed by him. His friend Ahmed (the source of the Gospel of John earlier on) encourages him to stop all his research because 'you're only making your life miserable' (64). At this point the central theme of the book is clearly enunciated: "I'm not being stubborn, Ahmed. I must have answers. I don't want a cover-up of lies. I want the truth and I will not be satisfied until I get it. I want the elders to know that they are wrong!" (ibid.)

His situation came to a head in 1969 when he stood up at a function at the local mosque: 'It was just as though someone [...] put his hands under my elbows and lifted me to my feet' (70). And now we find something interesting. One might expect ex-Muslim conversion

narratives to be fairly hagiographical, but that is not the case in general, and certainly not here. He recounts how he expounded on the Prophet Jesus from John, but then, and he explains this quite clearly, he gave into pride and instead of stopping where he should have (he says), he continued on and mentioned some unflattering things about the founder of his sect. He was ‘inflated with pride’, and following that, he was beaten into unconsciousness.

He then was taken to a hospital where he was told he would be poisoned by a nameless nurse. He escapes and flees to Lahore. He loses his money and the address of the family who was supposed to help him. He ends up working at a tea shop and sleeping on a park bench. But he makes a friend who is also estranged from his family. One day he decides to go home and takes Masood with him. Yet again he is separated from his friend (and host) and ends up sleeping in a water pipe until he is picked up by an extraordinarily generous and magnanimous Muslim man (who puts most Christians to shame in his hospitality, incidentally). Masood is given time to study and read, and he does—the Qur’an, the *ahadith*, commentaries, and eventually the Bible and Christian literature. He gets a job, starts attending the Methodist church, and eventually decides he must compare the Bible and the Qur’an, Jesus and Muhammad. His decision is made. He decides to convert and is baptized. He tells his generous hosts and they ask him to leave, which he does. The book ends (157) with a quotation from Hebrews 4:7: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.’

3 Masood’s Theology of Liberation

As mentioned before, the primary trope employed by Masood is one of liberation from darkness to light, which is appropriate because his first exposure to Scripture was the Gospel of John which employs this metaphor several times. First he describes his encounter with the local church as ‘light in a dark place’ (the title of chapter 11), and then he describes his conversion as moving ‘into the light of the Son’

(the title of chapter 12). Other Christians with a Muslim background employ other images (sleep to waking, slavery to freedom), and while Masood is not a stranger to these, the light-darkness dichotomy is a fundamental axis for his understanding of the liberation he has experienced in Christ.

But liberation theology is not systematic, primarily at least, just as this book is not a systematic theology. He is concerned with the transformation of his society. This theme does not come across as strongly as in some Islamic Christian liberation literature (i.e., *The Way of Fatima*², *Once an Arafat Man*³), but it is nevertheless there. Consider for example his frank disconcert with the state of women in Muslim Pakistan, in what is perhaps the most passionate passage in the entire book:

I felt like crying in the street: ‘Oh, people of Islam, go and see the divorced women in our Muslim society. See the women who are now spending their days in their parents’ houses. See them in the streets, begging and prostituting themselves for they have no one to care for them. See the children’s anguish and need. See them, people of Islam: those kicked out of their homes by their husbands, unable to live decently and rightly because they are not accepted. Look at them and be ashamed of our Islamic society! See the women whose husbands have married many wives and who cannot support them properly. Is this not lawlessness in the name of the purity of Islam?’ (138)

And this is his response to the apologists who ‘cry that Islam has freed women’ (ibid). The liberated society Masood was seeking was not only related to freedom of inquiry (which he rarely found in Pakistan), but also a society where women would not be treated like his mother, who was left alone for long periods of time with insufficient funds while his father visited his other wives and families (which he could not support well).

² A collection of writings by and about the Saudi Arabian martyr. It can be downloaded from www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/Fatima%20of%20Saudi%20Arabia.pdf

³ By Tass Saada with Dean Merrill (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House 2008).

Another theme that comes to the fore, especially later in the book, is related to wisdom: how does the MBB negotiate the straits of double-belonging? This is clearly exemplified when he comes back to his room and rolls up and puts away his prayer rug: ‘Praise God, I was now *on* the straight path and I could come to God at any time, anywhere, under any circumstances. I felt free!’ (151). Equally significant though is that he *did not* do the same thing with his Qur’an: ‘It was the Qur’an that had kept me searching for the truth...’ (152). Masood’s appreciation for the Qur’an sets his narrative apart from others, where it is either ignored or viewed ambivalently, or negatively.

An element we find in his narrative also sets his theology of praxis apart from that of Western evangelicalism, and that is an appreciation for the centrality of ritual in life. Western evangelical Christianity, though it was very significant in the genesis of World Islamic Christianity, has a difficult time understanding what to do with ritual. But Masood had no doubt about the significance of baptism. As soon as he had firmly decided to convert he visited a Western friend and quoted to him from Acts, ‘What doth hinder me to be baptized?’ The Methodist pastor suggests that he should be baptized in a small, private ceremony, but Masood insists on carrying out the rite ‘during regular worship’ (149), and thus it happened so. But what of the question of praxis? What is Masood saying that MBB’s and enquirers in a similar situation should or should not *do* as they live out their faith and seek the truth (liberation)? From what has been mentioned above we can deduce several significant indications, giving us both theology as practical knowledge (wisdom) and theology as action (praxis):

First, *don’t give up*. Masood has a message of encouragement for the enquirer or MBB, and this is a fairly universal theme in such narratives. You will face opposition from family, from employers, from the government, but don’t give up—keep going.

Second, *ask questions*. In so many cases Masood's problems came because he asked questions or, when he was asked questions, he gave answers. And, related to the first point, when he *had* questions he did not give up until he had answers.

Third, *don't get conceited*. Masood was quite honest about the times when pride crept into his heart and he is clear that this is damaging to the person seeking liberation in Christ.

Fourth, *prepare yourself for liminality*. Liminality is a complex theme, but in short it refers to an in-between stage where a person is neither here nor there, when an individual cannot clearly be classified by society at large. He is clear that even after years as a Christian he is still treated with suspicion (155). Muslims are suspicious of him because they don't comprehend why a person would leave Islam. Christians are suspicious of him because they don't understand why a person would do something so dangerous as to become a Christian (maybe he's a government agent?).

Fifth, *you have to make a decision sooner or later*. He expresses near the end of his book how, 'I still had a small hope that I might continue in Islam, but as a true believer in Jesus Christ' (143). He decides (against a large number of Western missiologists today who espouse Insider Movement approaches) that this is not possible: it was Jesus or Muhammad, the Bible or the Qur'an, salvation through the Cross or through your works.

4 Conclusion

There is no need here to comment further or critique these points. If they seem rather pedestrian as theology, that is mainly due to the Western impulse towards systematization and understanding theology as knowledge. For the Muslim or MBB Masood has presented challenging and relevant material that can immediately be put into use, in terms of interpreting one's own experience, coping with difficulties, and living out the liberation of society which is revealed in God's Messiah and his gospel.

Indeed, other points could be identified, but these seem, to me, to be the key insights and practices that Masood is urging for Muslims, enquirers and MBB's who read his book. To what extent his theology is successful must be answered by other MBB's who apply it in their lives, and not by academicians such as myself.