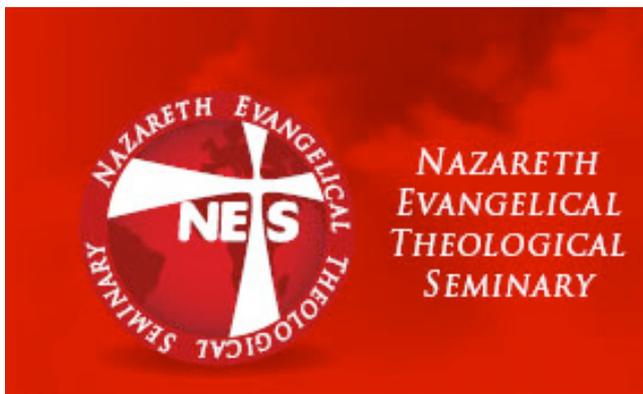


A Bridge between Two Worlds and Two Faiths: a review of Khalad Hussain's *Against the Grain*

By Duane Alexander Miller



Mary's Well Occasional Papers
*are published by Nazareth
Evangelical Theological
Seminary*

Director of Publications: Duane Alexander Miller

Guest Editor: Edwin Zehner

Citation:

Miller, Duane Alexander. 'A Bridge between Two Worlds and Two Faiths: a review of Khalad Hussain's *Against the Grain*' in *Mary's Well Occasional Papers*, 4:1, April (Nazareth, Israel: Nazareth Evangelical Theological Seminary 2015).

Key Words:

Religious Conversion, Kashmir, Pakistan, autobiography, ex-Muslim, Pakistani diaspora

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A review of *Against the Grain* by Khalad Hussain (Xlibris 2012, 218 pages)

In the past ten years there has been a significant increase in the number of conversion narratives from Islam to Christianity (and vice versa).¹ In this volume, Kashmiri convert Khalad Hussain makes his own contribution to this growing body of literature. My own doctoral work² through the University of Edinburgh lead me to delve deeply into the literature of converts from Islam to Christianity. This included an analytical article on Saiid Rabiipour's *Farewell to Islam* (2009), published as "It is okay to question Allah": the theology of freedom of Saiid Rabiipour, a Christian ex-Muslims.³ As with most articles I publish I shared this on my professional blog,⁴ and it was by this means that Mr. Hussain contacted me and asked me if I would be interested in reviewing his own autobiography.

The book begins with a depiction of the bucolic life led by his family in his hometown in the Mirpur region of Pakistani Kashmir. We are told about everything from schooling to agriculture to gender relations. Many native terms and words are shared with the readers in this section (and throughout the whole book). The author takes pain to translate customs and practices for the Western portion of his audience. The author also presents us with a number of questions about Islam that occurred to him (in retrospect, at least). For example, how could it be ethical that the Sikhs and Hindus were forced out of Pakistan at the time of independence? (p. 20) Why were women inferior to men? (p. 32) For instance, in remembering his childhood he writes,

There was a woman in our village who had been kidnapped from a camp in India and brought to Pakistan. She was married now to one of my relatives. I

¹ For instance David Nasser's *Jumping through Fires* (Baker, 2009), *The Imam's Daughter* by Hannah Shah (Zondervan, 2012), *I was a Minister in the Nation of Islam* by Alexis Johnson (Winepress, 2009), *Son of Hamas* by Mosab Yousef (Tyndale, 2011) and *Farewell to Islam* by Saiid Rabiipour (Xulon, 2009).

² The doctoral thesis is *Living among the Breakege: Contextual Theology-making and ex-Muslim Christians* (2014). A link to the PDF can be found at nazsem.blogspot.com/2014/02/doctoral-thesis-of-duane-alexander.html (accessed 16 July 2014).

³ In *Mary's Well Occasional Papers* 1(4), 1-13. www.nazarethseminary.org/datadir/en-events/ev91/files/MWOP_Miller_Duane_on_Saiid_Rabiipour.pdf. (Accessed 16 July 2014).

⁴ Duanemiller.wordpress.com. Other book reviews by this author can be found there and at his academia.edu page.

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used to wonder how she felt about her enforced migration. Did she miss her parents? Was it right to force her to become a Muslims? (p 21)

Why was lying and deceit not seen as immoral? (p. 17) Why do we have to pray in a language (Arabic) that none of us understand? He asked such questions even as a child:

From a very early age, I began to learn to read the Quran in Arabic. This meant I didn't understand what I was reading. At the time I didn't question it but later I began to wonder what was the point of reading something if you didn't understand it. (p. 40)

However, his critical questioning is balanced by positive observations about his childhood, including explaining how interdependent families were, compared to more the more individualistic ethos of the UK. He also explains that his father's love for honesty, even when it went 'against the grain' impacted him and contributed to a genuine love for truth.

The author is eventually sent to the UK with a fake passport by his parents. This is a major event for him because it represents a new and more diverse context wherein his avenues for seeking after truth are multiplied. This practice, he tells us near the end of the book, is quite common because among Pakistanis, "there was an acceptance of telling lies to get through immigration, social security or anything else to do with white people or their institutions" (207). Even though some of these attitudes may have been the practical result of decades of subcontinental anti-colonialism, even as a child these practices seemed questionable to him, even though it was, according to him, accepted without reflection by the people around him.

Hussain flourishes in the UK, and in the book he shares several of his experiences about being young, Muslim, and Pakistani in England. While in the UK he gains a great love for reading and writing, and writes articles for newspapers. We are also told of his fondness for various musical artists, especially including Bruce Springsteen. He explains how striking he found it that Springsteen, a white man, and Clarence

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Clemons, the band's saxophone player, were close friends (p 75). This instance of racial harmony challenged what some academics call his plausibility structure—causing to him ask questions that challenge everything he had been raised to believe without asking why. As is the case with so many other Christians from a Muslim background, he also becomes disappointed with his Muslim society's denigration of women and assumption that they are somehow worth less than men (p 78), and that women are “seen as property” (85).⁵

He does well professionally and eventually meets a Christian British woman, whom he marries. By this point he appreciates many aspects of British culture while being disillusioned with some aspects of Muslim Pakistani culture. He feels that many of the Pakistanis in Britain had really not made the place their home, something he had successfully done. Furthermore, as he met white people who stood up for the rights of the oppressed and experienced rule of law he came to appreciate the British legal and cultural heritage of equality before the eyes of the state. As he rhetorically notes: “Where else can you stand in a queue and be served when it is your turn without a question being asked as to whose son you are, which village you are from, or how much you are willing to pay even if the service is meant to be free [?]” (p 100).

A major concern in this book (and the author's life) is his marriage to a British woman. Upon visiting Pakistan his family treats her poorly, wondering why she has not converted to Islam, taken an Islamic (which is to say Pakistani or Arabic) name, and why she does not wear proper (i.e., Pakistani) clothing. He explains to us with sadness that the expectation was that he would take a real Pakistani wife who would stay behind in Kashmir and produce children for him, or that he would eventually divorce this unbeliever and marry a “good” woman. Hussain rejects all of this, having opted for agency in choosing his own direction and relationships—one of many instances of going “*against the grain.*”

⁵ For another example of a convert who found the treatment of women in his Islamic culture problematic see *Into the Light* (Paternoster, 2002, 2nd edition) by the Pakistani author Steven Masood, and my review of it, ‘*Into the Light: The Liberation Theology of Steven Masood, a Christian ex-Muslim*’ in *St Francis Magazine* 6(4), August 2010, 630-637, available online at www.academia.edu/1507472/Into_the_Light_the_Liberation_Theology_of_Steven_Masood_a_Christian_ex-Muslim (Accessed 16 July 2014).

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Linda, Hussain's British wife, was a self-identified born-again Christian when they married. The author does not address the thorny question of how a born again Christian can in good conscience marry a Muslim—a question just as problematic for most evangelicals as it is for most Muslims. Such practices are frowned upon in evangelical circles and often seen as a violation of the biblical injunction from Saint Paul to not be “unequally yoked” (2 Corinthians 6:14). In any case, with the arrival of their child the author, who is by now a non-practicing, nominal Muslim, starts to attend church with Linda.

One Sunday Hussain asks himself if Christianity might not be good for him as well. Eventually, he converts of his own will (not just to please his wife). His wife's approach to evangelism, if there was one, is not clear in the book. The author, however, does emphasize that the decision was not made under coercion, but of his own free will.

What were his motives for conversion? Some of them were hinted at in the first half of the book, as the author reflects back, sometimes perhaps anachronistically, on the considerations that led him away from his cultural and religious origins and into Christianity. The second half of the book moves away from these autobiographical themes and towards a series of essay-like reflections on what it means to be a Christian, on who Jesus is, and how all of this relates to his own life and to Kashmiri-British culture. In these essays the author draws with ease on Kashmiri sayings, images and lyrics from popular songs, communicating that he perceives himself as having integrating Western and Pakistani heritages into one identity under the guidance and blessing of Jesus his friend and brother⁶ and God his father.

One theme that stands out in this second section is the author's emphasis on forgiveness (p 132) and reconciliation (p 148ff). He reflects on how little mercy he saw in some Islamic contexts and also how he tried to make right his pre-conversion wrongs, by asking forgiveness of people whom he had wronged. He laments, for

⁶ Calling Jesus one's brother is uncommon in Christianity, but the author does indeed have a chapter titled 'Jesus, my friend, my brother' (beginning on p. 144).

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instance, the assassination of the governor of Punjab Salmaan Taseer. Having spoken up for the rights of a Christian woman he was accused of blasphemy and murdered (p 194). Another theme in this section is the preferred title used by Jesus to address God: Father. Consequently, the book has an entire chapter titled *Abba Father* wherein the author reflects on this truth—one that was also pivotal for another Pakistani convert, Bilquis Sheikh, whose conversion narrative is titled *I Dared to Call Him Father*.⁷

Toward the end of the book, the author picks up his personal story again, relating one last instance of the striving for honesty that is a recurring theme throughout the book and one of the major issues that attracted him to Christianity. In Christianity he has found the truth about a god who is both just and merciful, who does not require him to read a book in a foreign language (Arabic), who values truth and honesty. He also find the truth about himself—a sinner who is need of a savior, Jesus Christ, who upon repentance is adopted in God's own family. In this section he also talks about how his life has changed for the better since conversion, while also acknowledging that he still struggles with certain sins. It is in this penultimate chapter that we vividly encounter the wisdom theology that I elsewhere identified as a key facet of conversion narratives by Christians from a Muslim Background.⁸ Wisdom theology seeks to communicate who God is not by imparting abstract or analytical knowledge, but by revealing God's hidden and mysterious providence in the world and offering a template for how to live in accordance with it. Therefore, consistent with this practical approach to theology-making, in a few short pages we read about the practices of tithing, trusting God to provide for work and income, and even being utterly and totally honest in relation to immigration. Indeed, the whole chapter is titled 'I was an illegal immigrant!' This reality—that he was still living in the UK under a false name, must be fixed. This is what truth requires, even is this means risking his ability to stay in the UK. We read about his attempt to establish citizenship under his true identity, going against the grain of Pakistani custom *and* British advice, which is to leave well enough alone.

⁷ This book has been reprinted so many times and in so many countries that there is no single correct bibliographical citation of it, but Amazon lists Chosen Books, 2003.

⁸ See chapter five of Miller, *Living among the Breakage* (2014).

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There is, however, one aspect of this book that makes it stand out among religious conversion autobiographies, and that is the author's care to act as a mediator or translator between Christians and Muslims, and between white British people and Pakistanis. I had picked up on this special concern about a third of the way through the book, but in the final pages the author says this explicitly (p 217). Some of the more poignant messages he has to say to these two audiences include an admonition to Christians to make Muslim friends, to not be afraid of them, and to share the Gospel with them (see the chapter 'Being Christ'). To Pakistanis the book includes the author's prayer to God for Pakistan; an exhortation to humility and to work for change and progress; and a call to work against the rampant corruption, nepotism, racism, persecution of non-Muslims, and hatred towards India which he find especially problematic (see p 194 and following). By the end of the book, a Western reader will have learned a great deal about Pakistani culture, both good and bad, while Muslim readers will have had the opportunity to encounter the perspectives, motives, and post-conversion outlooks of a relatively articulate convert to Christianity.

The book does have some weaknesses. The words "on to" are often joined together incorrectly. There are some other minor spelling and grammatical errors. Finally, the author does not clearly outline the structure of the book and therefore by the time I was well into the essay section I found myself wondering when we would get back to the author's life story. If I had not already agreed to review the book I would probably not have completed it. This is not to say the topical essays are not good—they are—but the author should have clearly said that before concluding his life story he wanted to share some topical reflections.

The book makes a good contribution to the growing body of conversion testimonies from Islam to Christianity. It is marked by its humor and easy-going and easy-going style. Also, in comparison to many other post-conversion narratives, it has a relatively non-polemical tone, especially in the closing chapters, despite the negative allusions and observations about Pakistani and Muslim culture that sometimes appear in the book's opening pages, as these are balanced by positive memories of growing up in

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Pakistan.⁹ Frequent allusions to pop culture and Western literature show us a devout believer who loves this world, which he considers, as Rich Mullins once called it, “the land of my sojourn.” Christians involved in ministry among Pakistanis or hoping to visit Pakistan or Indian Kashmir will find the book to be full of cultural insights. South Asian Muslims with friends or relatives who are converts and who want to understand their seemingly illogical decision to leave Islam for Christianity will also find this book helpful. Finally, people interested in the social-political topic of the integration of non-whites into British culture will find in this book one successful example.

⁹ For an example of a more polemical conversion narrative, see Kamal Saleem *The Blood of Lambs* (Howard Books, 2009).