

Reverend David Benjamin Keldani, Catholic Priest, Iran



When asked how he came to Islam he wrote:

“My conversion to Islam cannot be attributed to any cause other than the gracious direction of the Almighty Allah. Without this Divine guidance all learning, search and other efforts to find the Truth may even lead one astray. The moment I belived in the Absolute Unity of God His Holy Apostle Muhammed became the pattern of my conduct and behavior.”

Abdu 'l-Ahad Dáwúd is the former Rev. David Benjamin Keldani, B.D., a Roman Catholic priest of the Uniate-Chaldean sect. He was born in 1867 at Urmia in Persia; educated from his early infancy in that town. From 1886-89 (three years) he was on the teaching staff of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission to the Assyrian (Nestorian) Christians at Urmia. In 1892 he was sent by Cardinal Vaughan to Rome, where he underwent a course of philosophical and theological studies at the Propaganda Fide College, and in 1895 was ordained Priest. During that time he contributed a series of articles to The Tablet on “Assyria, Rome and Canterbury”; and also to the Irish Record on the “Authenticity of the Pentateuch.” He had several translations of the Ave Maria in different languages, published in the Illustrated Catholic Missions. While in Constantinople on his way to Persia in 1895, he contributed a long series of articles in English and French to the daily paper, published there under the name of The Levant Herald, on “Eastern Churches.” In 1895 he joined the French Lazarist Mission at Urmia, and published for the first time in the history of that Mission a periodical in the vernacular Syriac called Qala-La Shárá, i.e. “The Voice of Truth.” In 1897 he was delegated by two Uniate-Chaldean Archbishops of Urmia and of Salmas to represent the Eastern Catholics at the Eucharistic Congress held at Paray-le-Monial in France under the presidency of Cardinal Perraud. This was, of course, on official invitation. The paper read at the Congress by “Father Benjamin” was published in the Annals of the Eucharistic Congress, called “Le Pelirin” of that year. In this paper, the Chaldean Arch-Priest (that being his official title) deplored the Catholic system of education among the Nestorians, and foretold the imminent appearance of the Russian priests in Urmia.

In 1898 Father Benjamin was back again in Persia. In his native vilage, Digala, about a mile from the town, he opened a school gratis. The next year he was sent by the Ecclesiastical authorities to take charge of the diocese of Salmas, where a sharp and scandalous conflict between the Uniate Archbishop, Khudabásh, and the Lazarist Fathers for a long time had been menacing a schism. On the day of New Year 1900, Father Benjamin preached his last and memorable sermon to a large congregation, including many non-Catholic Armenians and others in the Cathedral of St. George's Khorovábád, Salmas. The preacher's subject was "New Century and New Men." He recalled the fact that the Nestorian Missionaries, before the apperance of Islam, had preached the Gospel in all Asia; that they had numerous establishments in India (especially at the Malbar Coast), in Tartary, China and Mongolia; and that they translated the Gospel to the Turkish Uighurs and into other languages; that the Catholic, American and Anglican Missions, in spite of the little good they had done to the Assyro-Chaldean nation in the way of preliminary education, had split the nation - already a handful - in Persia, Kurdistan and Mesopotamia into numerous hostile sects; and that their efforts were destined to bring about the final collapse. Consequently he advised the natives to make some sacrifices in order to stand upon their own legs like men, and not to depend upon the foreign missions, etc.

Five big and ostentatious missions - Americans, Anglicans, French, Germans and Russians - with their colleges, Press backed up by rich religious societies, Consuls and Ambassadors were endeavoring to convert about one hundred thousand Assyro-Chaldeans from Nestorian heresy unto one or another of the five heresies. But the Russian Mission soon outstripped the others, and it was this mission which in 1915 pushed or forced the Assyrians of Persia, as well as the mountaineer tribes of Kurdistan, who had then immigrated into the plains of Salmas and Urmia, to take up arms against their respective Governments. The result was that half of his people perished in the war and the rest expelled from their native lands.

The great question which for a long time had been working its solution in the mind of this priest was now approaching its climax. Was Christianity, with all its multitudinous shapes and colors, and with its unauthentic, spurious and corrupted Scriptures, the true Religion of God? In the summer of 1900 he retired to his small villa in the middle of vineyards near the celebrated fountain of Cháli-Boulaghi in Digala, and there for a month spent his time in prayer and meditation, reading over and over the Scriptures in their original texts. The crisis ended in a formal resignation sent in to the Uniate Archbishop of Urmia, in which he frankly explained to Mar (Mgr.) Touma Audu the reasons for abandoning his sacerdotal functions. All attempts made by the ecclesiastical authorities to withdraw his decision were of no avail. There was no personal quarrel or dispute between Father Benjamin and his superiors; it was all question of conscience.

For several months Mr. Dáwúd - as he was now called - was employed in Tabriz as Inspector in the Persian Service of Posts and Customs under the

Belgian experts. Then he was taken into the service of the Crown Prince Muhammed Alí Mirsá as teacher and translator. It was in 1903 that he again visited England and there joined the Unitarian Community. And in 1904 he was sent by the British and Foreign Unitarian Association to carry on an educational and enlightening work among his country people. On his way to Persia he visited Constantinople; and after several interviews with Sheikhu 'l-Islám Jemálu 'd-Dín Effendi and other Ulémas, he embraced Islam.