

Pakistan Christian Loses Livelihood, Relatives for Leaving Islam

When Malik Pauloos of Bhakkar district, Punjab Province finally decided to trust a close relative with the secret that he had left Islam for Christianity, there was no question in his relative's mind that Pauloos' relationship with the family was over.

The family had been custodians of an Islamic shrine, the Pir Syed Karamat Shah in Kot Islam, for three generations. Though Pauloos had moved to Karachi, the capital of Sindh Province, 20 years ago to start a scrap business, he had continued fulfilling his duty to prepare the shrine for annual pilgrimages. But after he withdrew from it over time upon his conversion, shrine leaders were asking pointed questions about his adherence to Islam.

"I told him [the relative] to get the shrine people off my back, because I did not want to keep any point of contact with my past life," Pauloos, 36, told Compass. "Although shocked, my relative said that he would first try and make my family understand the situation, and then they could figure out a way of letting me walk away peacefully."

Pauloos did not realize that, beyond disowning him, his family would file a police complaint against him because—as a murtad or apostate deserving death—he was said to have committed "blasphemy." With authorities' help, family members are trying to track him down, he said.

Days before his baptism in September, a Pashtun scrap dealer heard about his conversion. A couple of Christians the dealer and Pauloos knew were sitting at the dealer's shop when they started discussing the United States, whose relations with

Pakistan have hit new lows in the past few months.

"The Pashtun man proudly claimed that many Americans were converting to Islam, but he was in for a big surprise when the Christians told him that I, a [formerly] devout Muslim, have been actively participating in church activities and had recently converted," Pauloos said.

The Pashtun trader immediately conveyed the information to Pauloos' family, and he received a call from one of his cousins, an engineer, who asked him to return to Punjab and explain.

"I told him I could not come back because of my business in Karachi, but he kept insisting that I should return to Bhakkar and deny reports that I had converted," Pauloos said. "He then started threatening me that if I didn't return home within three days, they would spread the news and even put the police after me on blasphemy charges. I told him that the threats were meaningless to me. He put down the phone, but before doing so he said that I would be responsible for the consequences."

The next day his father put up a notice in local newspapers disowning him, he said.

"I called my cousin and told him that now that they had disowned me, they should know that I had indeed become a Christian and would not renounce Christ even if they killed me," he said.

Pauloos said that he left his business last month and came to Punjab, where he has been traveling from one city to another sharing his experience of Christ.

Baptized in September after spending more than 10 years learning about the Christian faith, Pauloos said he does not regret trusting in Christ as Savior even though he has lost a comfortable life and a successful business and his Muslim

family and friends are in hot pursuit to “kill the apostate.”

Family members had begun to grow suspicious when they heard that he was regularly seen in the company of Christian pastors and was avoiding the Islamic shrine and its spiritual head, Baba Raees.

“In fact, Raees had also expressed concern over my lack of interest in the shrine’s activities over the years and had asked one of my cousins to investigate why I wasn’t taking his calls,” Pauloos said. “Fearing that my disclosure would imperil the lives of all Christians connected with me, I told my family that I was keeping contact with the Christians to understand their faith, and that this was merely an education for me. I did not want my family to know that I had lost confidence in Islam and wanted to walk away from the faith of my elders.”

In an attempt to dispel the impression that he had become “murtad,” he visited the shrine one final time in 2010.

“Raees and other people made repeated attempts to judge whether I was still a Muslim or had renounced my faith, but I gave them the same reason that I had given to my family,” he said. “In September this year, I got baptized in Faisalabad. The whole affair was kept a secret because of the security situation in Pakistan.”

A relative told him that his family and Muslims associated with the shrine were using their influence to send the police after him, he said.

“They have publicly announced that I would have to pay for my ‘crime,’ but even death will not deter me from giving up my Christian walk,” he said.

When he told his Christian friends of the threats on his life, many suggested that he relocate to another country, he said, but he told them he would neither leave Pakistan nor yield to

the demands of hostile Muslims.

"I will serve the Lord in my country even if it means putting my life on the line," he said.

Haunted Journey

Stories abound of Muslims coming to Christ through dreams, but Pauloos' journey began with nightmares.

They began haunting him in 2000, and his health deteriorated as he tried all possible remedies. Increasingly going without sleep, his condition worsened as he spent several nights fearing his nightmares might turn into reality. One day he shared his problem with a Christian acquaintance, who suggested that he visit a pastor and request prayer.

"I went to meet the pastor in Karachi and shared my problem with him," he said. "He listened intently and then prayed for me. Before he started praying, he asked me if I had faith that Christ could help me. As Muslims, we hold Jesus Christ in high esteem as a prophet and also believe that He performed miracles. I said yes, and the pastor started praying. As he was praying, I felt as if someone was brushing off the dirt from me ... I started breathing!"

Before he left, the pastor, whose name is withheld for security reasons, shared some verses of the Bible with him.

"He told me things about Christ that I had never heard or read before and said that I could come visit him whenever I needed help," he said, adding that he went to the pastor two or three more times for prayer, and his condition began to improve.

Pauloos said that he did not have any nightmares for a year.

"In 2001, I again started suffering from the dreaded nightmares and shared this with the pastor," he said. "He invited me to his church. It was the first time I had participated in any Christian worship. His congregation

welcomed me warmly and gave me immense respect. Then they all prayed for 'their Muslim brother,' and this gesture further attracted me toward Christ."

Increasing contact with the Christians left him "greatly inspired," he said, and when he found himself on a road in Haripur to meet with an uncle who had been in an accident in northwest Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, he felt himself drawn to a small church building, he said.

"As if on cue, my feet started heading towards that direction," he said. "I met the church's pastor and shared with him my experiences in Karachi."

The pastor, whose name is withheld for security reasons, gave him his first Bible, he said, and he attended his church service a few times.

"But then word about this spread in the city, and the pastor requested I stop going there, because it could endanger the lives of Christians living in the area," Pauloos said. "He apologized for having to ask me to stop, but I told him that I understood the consequences the congregation would have to face and left the city after a few days."

Back in Karachi, Pauloos said he started reading the Bible regularly and, in order to better understand it, also initiated contacts with other pastors. He recalled one pastor, whose name is withheld for security reasons, who came from the same caste as his.

"He offered a special prayer for me, asking God to guide me as I searched for the truth," Pauloos said.

He said that in June, he traveled to Iran and Armenia on business, carrying his Bible the whole time.

"In Tehran I strongly felt that the time had come for me to get water baptism and start a new life in Christ," he said. "I

decided that I would take water baptism as soon as I got back."