

Philobus, Egyptian Coptic Priest and Missionary (part 1 of 2)

Description: A priest who at one time actively spread misconceptions about Islam accepts Islam (part 1).

By Ibrahim Khalil Philobus

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Al-Haj Ibrahim Khalil Ahmad, formerly Ibrahim Khalil Philobus, was an Egyptian Coptic priest who studied theology and obtained a high degree from Princeton University. He studied Islam to find gaps to attack it; instead he embraced Islam with his four children, one of whom is now a brilliant professor in Sorbonne University, Paris France. In an interesting way, he reveals himself saying:

"I was born in Alexandria on the 13th of January 1919 and was sent to the American Mission schools until I got my secondary education certificate there. In 1942 I got my diploma from Asiut University and then I specialized in religious studies as a prelude to join the Faculty of Theology. It was no easy task to join the faculty, as no candidate could join it unless he got a special recommendation from the church, and also, after he should pass a number of difficult exams. I got a recommendation from Al-Attareen Church in Alexandria and another from the Church Assembly of Lower Egypt after passing many tests to know my qualifications to become a man of religion. Then I got a third recommendation from Snodus Church Assembly which included priests from Sudan and Egypt.

The Snodus sanctioned my entrance into the Faculty of Theology in 1944 as a boarding student. There I studied at the hands of American and Egyptian teachers until my graduation in 1948.

I was supposed, he continued, to be appointed in Jerusalem, had it not been for the war that broke out in Palestine that same year, so I was sent to Asna in Upper Egypt. That same year I registered for a thesis at the American University in Cairo. It was about the missionary activities among Muslims. My acquaintance with Islam started in the Faculty of Theology where I studied Islam and all the methods through which we could shake the faith of Muslims and raise misconceptions in their understanding of their own religion.

In 1952 I got my M.A. from Princeton University in U.S.A. and was appointed as a teacher in the Faculty of Theology in Asiut. I used to teach Islam in the faculty as well as the faulty misconceptions spread by its enemies and the missionaries against it. During that period, I decided to enlarge my study of Islam so that I should not read the missionaries books on it only. I had so much faith in myself that I was confirmed to read the other point of view. Thus I began to read books written by Muslim authors. I also decided to read the Quran and understand its meanings. This was implied by my love of knowledge and moved by my desire to add more proofs against Islam. The result was,

however, exactly the reverse. My position began to shake and I started to feel an internal strong struggle, and I discovered the falsehood of everything I had studied and preached to the people. But I could not face myself bravely and tried instead to overcome this internal crisis and continue my work.

In 1954, Mr. Khalil added, I was sent to Aswan as secretary general of the German Swiss Mission. That was only my apparent position, for my real mission was to preach against Islam in Upper Egypt especially among Muslims. A missionary conference was held at that time at Cataract Hotel in Aswan, and I was given the floor to speak. That day I spoke too much, reiterating all the repeated misconceptions against Islam; and at the end of my speech, the internal crisis came to me again and I started to revise my position.

Continuing his talk about the said crisis, Mr. Khalil said, "I began to ask myself: Why should I say and do all these things which I know for sure I am a liar, as this is not the truth? I took my leave before the end of the conference and went out alone to my house. I was completely shaken. As I walked through Firyal public garden, I heard a verse of the Quran on the radio. It said:

"Say: It has been revealed to me that a company of Jinns listened (to the Quran). They said: We have really heard a wonderful recital! It gives guidance to the Right, and we have believed therein: We shall not join (in worship) any gods with our Lord." (Quran 72:1-2)

"And as for us, since we have listened to the Guidance, we have accepted it: and any one who believes in His Lord, has no fear of either a short (account) or of any injustice." (Quran 72:13)

I felt a deep comfort that night, and when I returned home I spent the whole night all by myself in my library reading the Quran. My wife inquired from me about the reason of my sitting up all night and I pleaded from her to leave me alone. I stopped for a long time thinking and meditating on the verse:

"Had We sent down this Quran on a mountain, verily thou wouldst have seen it humble itself and cleave asunder for fear of God..." (Quran 59:21)

And the verse:

"Strongest among men in enmity to the believers wilt thou find the Jews and the Pagans, and nearest among them in love to the believers wilt thou find those who say, 'We are Christians': Because amongst these are men devoted to learning. And men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant. And when they listen to the revelation received by the Messenger, thou wilt see their eyes overflowing with tears, for they recognize the truth: They pray: 'Our Lord! We believe, write us down among the witnesses. What cause can we have not to believe in God and the truth which has come to us, seeing that we long for our Lord to admit us to the

company of the righteous?" (Quran 5:82-84)

Mr. Khalil then quoted a third quotation from the Holy Quran which says:

"Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered prophet, whom they find mentioned in their own (Scriptures), in the Taurat and in the Gospel; for he commands them what is just and forbids them what is evil; he allows them as lawful what is good (and pure) and prohibits them what is bad (and impure): He releases them from their heavy burdens and from the yokes that are upon them. So it is those who believe in him, honor him, help him and follow the light which is sent down with him, it is they who will prosper. Say: O men! I am sent unto you all, as the Messenger of God, to Whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth: there is no god but He: It is He that giveth both life and death. So believe in God and His Messenger. The unlettered Prophet, who believeth in God and His Words: follow Him that (so) you may be guided." (Quran 7:157-158)

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Now that same night, Mr. Khalil dramatically concluded:

"I took my final decision. In the morning I spoke with my wife from whom I have three sons and one daughter. But no sooner than she felt that I was inclined to embrace Islam than she cried and asked for help from the head of the mission. His name was Monsieur Shavits from Switzerland. He was a very cunning man. When he asked me about my true attitude, I told him frankly what I really wanted and then he said: Regard yourself out of job until we discover what has befallen you. Then I said: This is my resignation from my job. He tried to convince me to postpone it, but I insisted. So he made a rumor among the people that I became mad. Thus I suffered a very severe test and oppression until I left Aswan for good and returned to Cairo."

When he was asked about the circumstances to his conversion he replied: "In Cairo, I was introduced to a respectable professor who helped me overcome my severe trial, and this he did without knowing anything about my story. He treated me as a Muslim, for I introduced myself to him as such although until then I did not embrace Islam officially. That was Dr. Muhammad Abdul Moneim Al Jamal, the then undersecretary of treasury.

He was highly interested in Islamic studies and wanted to make a translation of the Holy Quran to be published in America. He asked me to help him because I was fluent in English since I had got my M.A. from an American University. He also knew that I was preparing a comparative study of the Quran, the Torah and the Bible. We cooperated in this comparative study and in the translation of the Quran.

When Dr. Jamal knew that I had resigned from my job in Aswan and that I was then unemployed, he helped me with a job in Standard Stationery Company in Cairo. So I was well established after a short while. I did not tell my wife about my intention to embrace Islam, thus she thought that I had forgotten the whole affair, and that it was nothing but a transitory crisis that no more existed. But I knew quite well that my official conversion to Islam needs long complicated measures, and it was in fact a battle which I preferred to postpone for some time until I became well off and after I completed my comparative study."

Then Mr. Khalil continued:

"In 1955 I did complete my study and my material and living affairs became well established. I resigned from the company and set up a training office for importing stationery and school articles. It was a successful business from which I gained much more money than I needed. Thus I decided to declare my official conversion to Islam. On the 25th of December 1959, I sent a telegram to Dr. Thompson, head of the American Mission in Egypt informing him that I had embraced Islam. When I told my true story to Dr. Jamal he was completely astonished. When I declared my conversion to Islam, new troubles began. Seven of my former colleagues in the mission had tried their best to persuade me to cancel my declaration, but I refused. They threatened to separate me from my wife and I said: She is free to do as she wishes. They threatened to kill me. But when they found me to be stubborn they left me alone and sent to me an old friend of mine who was also a colleague of mine in the mission. He wept very much in front of me. So I recited before him the following verses from the Quran:

"And when they listen to the revelation received by the Messenger, thou wilt see their eyes overflowing with tears, for they recognize the truth: They pray: 'Our Lord! We believe, write us down among the witnesses. What cause can we have not to believe in God and the truth which has come to us, seeing that we long for our Lord to admit us to the company of the righteous?'" (Quran 5:83-84)

I said to him:

"You should have wept in humiliation to God on hearing the Quran and believe in the truth which you know but you refuse. He stood up and left me as he saw no use. My official conversion to Islam was in January 1960."

Mr. Khalil was then asked about the attitude of his wife and children and he answered:

"My wife left me at that time and took with her all the furniture of our house. But all my children joined me and embraced Islam. The most enthusiastic among them was my

eldest son Isaac who changed his name to Osman, then my second son Joseph and my son Samuel, whose name is Jamal, and daughter Majida who is now called Najwa. Osman is now a doctor of philosophy working as a professor in Sorbonne University in Paris teaching oriental studies and psychology. He also writes in 'Le Monde' magazine. As in regards to my wife, she left the house for six years and agreed to come back in 1966, provided that she keeps her religion. I accepted this, because in Islam there is no compulsion in religion. I said to her: I do not want you to become a Muslim for my sake but only after you are convinced. She feels now that she believes in Islam but she cannot declare this for fear of her family, but we treat her as a Muslim woman, and she fasts in Ramadan because all my children pray and fast. My daughter Najwa is a student in the Faculty of Commerce, Joseph is a doctor pharmacologist and Jamal is an engineer.

During this period, that is since 1961 until the present time, I have been able to publish a number of books on Islam and the methods of the missionaries and the orientalist against it. I am now preparing a comparative study about women in the three Divine religions with the object of highlighting the status of women in Islam. In 1973, I performed Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) and I am doing activities preaching Islam. I hold seminars in the universities and charitable societies. I received an invitation from Sudan in 1974 where I held many seminars. My time is fully used in the service of Islam."

Finally Mr. Khalil was asked about the salient features of Islam which have attracted his attention most. And he answered:

"My faith in Islam has been brought about through reading the Holy Quran and the biography of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. I no longer believed in the misconceptions against Islam, and I am especially attracted by the concept of unity of God, which is the most important feature of Islam. God is only One. Nothing is like Him. This belief makes me the servant of God only and of no one else. Oneness of God liberates man from servitude to any human being and that is true freedom.

I also like very much the rule of forgiveness in Islam and the direct relationship between God and His servants.

"Say: O my servants who have transgressed against their souls! despair not of the Mercy of God: for God forgives all sins: for He is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. Turn ye to your Lord (in repentance) and submit to Him before the Chastisement comes on you: After that ye shall not be helped." (Quran 39:53-54)

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