

Christian W. Troll SJ

Sankt Georgen, Frankfurt.

12th July 2020

Letter to Paul Jackson (11.06.1937 – 05.07.2020), a companion and friend

Dear Paul,

You went ahead of us to our Lord on the evening on Sunday, 5th July (the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Yr A), when the Church proclaims the wonderful Gospel text, Matthew 11: 25-30, with Jesus' invitation: "*Come unto me, all you that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*" For me, this was no mere coincidence.

I address you, Paul, in the form of a short letter because that is how we communicated often in the past, from the early 1970s onwards. From now on we shall be in spiritual correspondence; more intense than ever. I address you as my companion who has reached the goal that we all are trying to attain: full communion with our crucified and risen LORD. In and through HIM, you are closer to me than ever before and I am deeply grateful for this.

Victor, who follows in your footsteps, sent me all the information about the exact dates of your remarkable life-journey, about your funeral and the reaction to your departure on the part of your Jesuit companions, the Church in India and beyond, your Muslim friends and admirers, and so many other people from all over the world.

In the few lines that follow I shall not dwell upon the stages of your journey. Instead, I should like to tell you and all who may read these lines, those things which, in my view, are some of the essential lessons that your life and teaching hold for us, especially for those amongst us who share, in one way or the other, the basic vocation to which you have tried so relentlessly to respond. What are the crucial elements of your legacy? What are the challenges your truly remarkable life throws at us?

In the first, place there is your firm and unwavering faith. The Qur'an names such faith *yaqīn* (certainty), and its fruit *iṭminān* (inner peace and stability). I remember Professor Hasan Askari, your revered friend and guide, telling me, when we spoke one day in Patna about you, how much he was impressed by your strength of faith. This quality of faith was also the fruit of your regular practice of liturgical and personal prayer and meditation. No-one meeting you could remain unimpressed by the depth of your prayer life. No surprise that in your writings about Sharafuddin Maneri and the Sufis in general, the depth of the prayer life of so many Muslims finds regular mention. However, the discipline and austerity of your life-style went together with your remarkable sense of humour. Unforgettable is your broad, loud, contagious laughter that easily filled a whole community refectory.

During all the years when we met regularly, I saw you suffering from asthma, and I know that this, with advancing years linked to heart disease, caused you many sleepless nights. The dusty summer months of northern India reinforced your suffering. You were always glad to return from dry, dusty places, like Aligarh and Delhi, to the relatively more humid climate of Patna. But, of course, the humid hot months of the extended Patna summer have their own trying quality. You endured the labour and fatigue of the long years of your busy life in Patna patiently!

Another notable feature of your life is your almost obstinate attachment to one place (the Khuda Bakhsh Library), to one academic and spiritual guide and friend (Professor Hasan Askari), to one city (Patna, the ancient capital of Bihar) and, above all, to the one subject of your dedicated and single-minded study, the Muslim Saint, Sharafuddin Maneri, and the treasure of his writings. These were available exclusively in the form of manuscripts written in classical Persian. It immediately strikes the student of your writings, how frequently you refer to this Library, to Hasan Askari and especially, to Sharafuddin Maneri (1263-1381) and his *Hundred Letters*. This collection of letters of spiritual guidance constitutes the first of the works of this Sufi, whose corpus of writings you translated into

English. In your lectures and conversation, you referred frequently to this collection of letters simply as 'the book'. For you the writings of Sharafuddin became, as you put it once, the golden key that opened to you the door to understanding Muslims and their Islam. This, as you openly admitted, one-sided option from among many other aspects of Islam, resulted from the spiritual depth you had discovered in Maneri's life and writings. You knew, of course, from your deep and wide-ranging study of Islam, other dimensions of this religion, its teachings and its practice. But for you, this particular author and his writings became simply the hermeneutic key to understanding the core and essence of Muslim faith. This particular access to Islam undergirded your unwavering commitment to making the quality of Muslim faith known to all in India and beyond.

Apart from your remarkable academic achievement and its fruits in the form of publications that reached a world-wide audience, I wish to mention another, most precious, original contribution of yours to the practice and the teaching of Christian-Muslim relations. It consists in the method of teaching that you developed and put into practice over many years. I cannot do better than quote your own succinct account of this in your autobiographical note:

"This was the era when [Jesuit] students [in Bihar] studied theology locally for two years before moving to a central institute for the rest of their studies. I was asked to conduct a two-week course on contextualized Islam, meaning the religion as it was actually lived, not as found in a book. There were about eight to ten students each year. I would go to various towns where there was a good number of Muslims and meet the principals of madrasas, Muslim seminaries, Sufi devotees at shrines, middle-class Muslims, usually through teachers and students of Christian English-medium schools, and poor Muslims, mainly with the help of sisters engaged in social work. I arranged for two students to go to each town. Back in Patna, the pairs were chosen and their destinations assigned. I gave them all a thorough preparation, in writing, and a list of possible questions to ask. They usually stayed in the parish but a few stayed in a madrasa or with a Muslim family.

They would leave on a Monday and return on the Wednesday of the following week. On the following Thursday, Friday and Saturday they would recount their experiences together with their reflections and, in the time left over, we would examine some of the salient issues that had been raised. Both these programmes ran for twenty-five years. They show that, despite having a poorly functioning heart, I still managed to work, albeit not at full throttle."

This quote demonstrates to all of us how meticulously you planned and prepared your teaching of Muslim faith and practice through field experience. Only a person who, besides having a deep knowledge of Muslim religious life, was familiar with the social life of Bihar's Muslims and with the way their religious institutions function, and who, at the same time, knew each of his students well enough to place him or her in the right spot to receive the maximum benefit from this experience, was able to teach successfully in this way! Your account also demonstrates how well you had learned, as a young educator and school teacher during your time as a scholastic in Hazaribagh Province, to put into practice the basic principles of sound Jesuit pedagogy. And indeed, how much good could be generated by all those Christians and Muslims who teach Islam to Christians, as well as by all those Muslims and Christians who teach Christianity to Muslims, in various parts of the world, if they would only follow your teaching, partly through your field-experience method.

A further element of your legacy, Paul, is the essential role you played in the foundation of the Islamic Studies Association (ISA) and, even more importantly, your relentless active

support of all of its activities for more than four decades. The celebration of the fortieth birthday of ISA last year showed that this small but significant initiative of the Indian Church is very much alive. As you will remember well, ISA was founded in 1979 by a group of scholars and their friends in the framework of the Vidyajyoti College of Theology, New Delhi. Since then ISA has been at the service of Christian-Muslim relations in the Indian subcontinent and the entire South Asia. Its members teach Islam and interreligious dialogue in a number of universities and academic institutes throughout India. One of the major ISA publications was the handbook, *The Muslims of India: Beliefs and Practices*, edited by you, Paul. This book focused on Indian Muslims by giving the general Islamic background needed for others to understand them better.

I do not know of any initiative in the field of Christian-Muslim dialogue comparable to ISA, and I do not know of anyone who has contributed more effectively and 'stubbornly' to developing and sustaining the vision and activities of this small association through the ups and downs of its life. It is no exaggeration to state that you have displayed heroic courage to persevere in the arduous task of keeping the little boat afloat.

The quarterly journal *Salaam*, which developed from the duplicated *Jami Notes*, is another important service that ISA has rendered to promote Christian-Muslim relations in the context of pluralist India for the last forty years without interruption. Anyone who wishes to see the contribution that you have made to ISA and to its annual conventions, held each year together with local Muslims and Christians in various cities of the Subcontinent, should consult the many volumes of *Salaam*. There the reader will find numerous contributions written by you and, last but not least, your carefully written minutes and reports of the ISA meetings and conventions.

In one of the newspaper articles about you from the Urdu press, published immediately after your departure (which Victor kindly sent me by e-mail), the author reports that among Muslims who knew you, you have been and will be known as a saintly Christian Sufi in the footsteps of Makhdūm Sahib, Sharafuddīn Maneri. I cannot do better than associate with these Muslim believers. They have understood perfectly well what, throughout these years, has been the objective of your life and labours in HIS service. Thank you, once again, Paul, for your outstanding witness.

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