Karl Gottlieb Pfander

1803-1866

Servant of God in Armenia, Iraq, India and Turkey



Karl was born in Saxony. He was one of nine children. His parents were leading members of the local pietist congregation. They ran the village bakery. Karl entered Latin school aged 12 and at 16 he went on to the Moravian Academy in Stuttgart. At this young age Karl had read literature from the Basel Mission and the thought of becoming a missionary was already in his mind.

The Basel Mission saw itself as a 'Fellowship' within the universal church dedicated to the task of uniting pietist Christians in a commitment to mission and evangelism. The dominant theological theme of pietism was the need for individual repentance and renewal beginning with the consciousness of one's own sin. They saw the Bible as the only source of authority. The study of Scripture was the main curriculum in their Mission Training College.

Karl offered himself to the Basel Mission aged 17. He entered the training college in 1820. As well as studying the Bible in the original languages, the curriculum also focused on Arabic and the Qur'an. Early on the Basel Mission had identified 'mission to Muslims' as a high priority.

Basel students were also required to learn skilled manual trades. Financial independence became a hallmark of many of the Christian communities where they worked. In 1825, on completion of his studies, Karl was ordained as a Lutheran. His first posting was Shushi – the provincial capital of Karabagh in Russian Armenia – where there was a team from the Basel Mission. Some of the team were reaching out to the Armenian Orthodox churches. These 'Christians' were about 1/3 of the local population the remaining 2/3 were Muslim and this is where Karl focused. He believed the key was for them to read the Bible in Persian – their preferred language.

He made it his goal to master Persian. He also learned Armenian and Azerbaijani. He made a number of trips into Persia and also spent two years (1929-31) in Baghdad with Anthony Norris Groves. He began to write apologetic books. He wanted to demonstrate that the truth lay in Christianity. He believed he was breaking new ground both in scholarly accuracy and in his attempts to inculcate the Gospel into the linguistic and cultural worlds of his Muslim readers. He seemed to succeed as some thought these were the writings of apostate Muslims.

The German manuscript of his first book **Balance of Truth (Mizan al-Haqq)** was completed in 1829. Much of his later work was devoted to revising and translating into other languages this first book and its two sequels: **Miftah al-Asrar** (Key of Mysteries) and **Tariq al-Hayat** (Way of Life). The Armenian translation of Balance of Truth appeared in in 1831 and the Persian in 1835. Later it was translated into Turkish and Urdu.

In 1833 Basel Mission gave Karl some European leave mainly because of his need to find a wife. He was first to look for a Russian wife in Moscow and if he didn't succeed, to try in Saxony. In Moscow he met Sofia Reuss the daughter of a minor aristocrat. They married in July 1834. After a short visit to his family in Saxony, they returned to join the Shushi Basel Mission team. Sadly Sofia died in childbirth in Shushi in May 1835.

Also in 1835 the Russian authorities expelled all missionaries except those from the Greek Church it has never been clear what precipitated this. Perhaps it was Karl's activities or possibly hostility from the Armenian Archbishop who petitioned the Czar to expel the Basel team. Karl found himself a jobless widower. After considering several options it was decided he would go to a Muslim area in India.

The Basel Mission didn't have any teams in such areas but they had already seconded workers to CMS (Church Missionary Society – an agency of the Church of England). So in 1840 CMS posted Karl to their Agra Mission. He continued to work on the Urdu translation that was published in 1843.

In 1841 he met and married Miss Elizabeth Emma Swinbourne. She had arrived in India in 1840 designated by CMS for evangelism among women. They had three sons and three daughters. Karl's writings in Urdu were widely distributed. Their style, idiom and binding resembled popular Muslim tracts. Muslims soon began to respond to his arguments with letters, pamphlets, and articles in the Urdu press. Karl responded with more writing.

In 1847 he published **Hall al-Ishkal** (Solution of Difficulties). After a decade of literary exchanges and one private debate with the Ulema in his in his bungalow, one of the leading Muslim respondents Rahmat Ali (1818-91) invited Karl to join him in public debate. There was an age-long Muslim tradition of debating. Half a century earlier, Henry Martyn had reluctantly accepted the same challenge. Although Karl had reservations about this type of debate (as Henry Martyn had had) he still thought it wise to accept the challenge. He wrote to CMS, "***I was well aware that very little good is done by such public discussion***". The main debaters were Karl and Rahmat Ali. They were each supported by a second and a small team of assistants. The subjects for debate were agreed ahead of time by both sides:

- The abrogation and corruption of the Christian Scriptures
- The doctrine of the Trinity
- Muhammad's claim to prophethood
- The inspiration of the Qur'an

The debate wasn't a resounding success although both sides claimed victory! Karl had not anticipated that the Muslim scholars would use European works of Biblical criticism to make their case. Karl was wholly unfamiliar with these authors.

Soon after this he was transferred to Peshawar. Perhaps this was a wise move on the part of CMS but there is no evidence that they lost any confidence in Karl. In fact in 1856 the then Archbishop of Canterbury – John Bird Summer – awarded him the Lambeth Dr. of Divinity degree in recognition of his endeavours to win Muslims. The same year the Bishop of Calcutta ordained him as an Anglican. Karl stayed in India till 1861. He was then appointed to help a fellow Basel graduate (S.W. Koelle) establish a CMS mission in Istanbul. His Turkish edition of Mizan al-Haqq was published in 1861. Throughout his career and even in the violent events in India in 1857-58, Karl always preached in public places. It is recorded that he, "***Went on preaching on the streets right through the most anxious time when intercepted letters revealed plots to murder Europeans***".

Sir Herbert Edwards (1819-68), English administrator, soldier, statesman and devout Christian who was in Peshawar remembered, "***The burly Saxon figure .... beaming with***

intellect, simplicity and benevolence .... Bible in hand as usual, he took his stand on a bridge or in a thoroughfare. Without boasting and without fear he proclaimed the truth and beauty of Christianity".

Karl's activities in Turkey were curtailed by the Caliph. In 1864 he banned Mizan al-Haqq, closed down the preaching halls in the bazaar and imprisoned those Muslims who had become Christians. The CMS mission relocated to Egypt and Carl went to England with his wife who was ill. He unexpectedly fell ill and died very suddenly in early 1866. His wife survived him by 15 years. This is just a brief look at a man who profoundly influenced outreach to Muslims.

Whatever we may think of his confrontational approach, there is no disputing the fact that the work of Karl Pfander and his attempts to present the Gospel in a way Muslims could understand, marked an important new phase in Muslim Christian relations. Profound theological issues were addressed for the first time by recognised scholars.

Temple Gairdner said that Karl Pfander had the 3 things necessary for public controversy:

- Absolute command of his subject
- Absolute command of the language thought and manner of the people
- Absolute command of himself.

From these early beginnings others have built on Karl's approach and adapted it in many ways. His books are a legacy to those who have followed after him. In the early 20th century William St. Clair-Tisdall (1859-1928) revised and translated into English Karl's first three books. The fact that these books are still in print today is a testimony to their enduring usefulness and to the fact that some Christians still value his approach. The preface to the 1986 edition of Balance of Truth says, "**We do not hesitate to print such a book of fundamental importance ... Islam is still the same and needs a definitive answer.**"

Bishop Valpy French acknowledged Karl as his "**Master in missions**" and as "**a worthy successor of ... Henry Martyn**". But Valpy French himself modified this style. He believed that rational argument could never do justice to the 'mystery' that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. His goal was not so much to defeat Islam as to win Muslim hearts.

In 1941 Samuel Zwemer wrote: "**The outstanding example of a missionary to Muslims who used "controversy" in winning them for Christ was undoubtedly Karl Gottlieb Pfander. Raymon Lull, Henry Martyn, St Clair Tisdall and Temple Gairdner also used the apologetic method but, in the words of Bishop Valpy French, 'He far out-topped all the missionaries of his day as the Christian champion.' He has left an imperishable monument of his life's labours and bequeaths a rich legacy to other ages of the church in his clear, strong, unembellished statements of Christian truth.**"

Others, like Lewis Bevan Jones (1880-1960) openly criticized Karl's books. He aimed to explain Christianity rather than refute Islam. It is true that Karl's books certainly provoked some bitterly anti-Christian literature – such as the work of Ahmet Deedat who acknowledged Rahmat Ali's influence. However we evaluate Karl's arguments, we must respect his intellectual abilities, his literary skills and his Christian commitment. We must also agree that his training in Arabic and Islamics and lifelong immersion in Muslim culture, as well as his mastery of languages, are still recognised as essential qualifications for outreach to Muslims.