

WHY I JOINED JAMIAT

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By Professor Khurshid Ahmad

LEO TOLSTOY once wrote:

"And he went on talking about himself, not realising that, this was not as interesting to others as it was to him."

Despite this warning by a famous literature I have ventured to write the story of my finding the Jamiat, not because I feel that is important or will be of absorbing interest, but because it can unveil the working of the mind of a young man who is educated in the modern educational institutions. It can perhaps be a typical case study, unfolding the influences which fashion the belief and character of our young man is the counter-influences which can change the course of their lives.

Mainly Biographical

I was born in a middle class family of Delhi. Reverence for religion, observance of religious rites and rituals, regard for moral values formed part and parcel of the air I breathed. The first word that was dinned into my ears was "Allah". I started reading Quran before I joined the school. I remember offering my prayers when I was only four or five years old really speaking, it was not "offering the prayers" but imitating others while they prayed, and after some time also chanting "All praise be to Allah", instead of all that we say now.

Fortunately or unfortunately, I was born in a family which had extraordinary love and affection for the children. We had to live in the house for the whole day. We used to go to the school accompanied by a servant or should I say 'Chepron', and had a whole time tutor for our academic guidance. We had a very limited circle of friends. Consequently, I had a very simple and clean school life having no adventure or misadventure of any kind. That is why I also remained immune to those uncouth and alien influences which often destroy a budding child. But I always had a feeling of isolation. I never loved my own shackles, however golden they looked.

When I was in the tenth class my restlessness began to express itself. I used to read Urdu novels and short stories and was enamoured of them. I also started going to pictures and my first experience was very exciting. Parents did not allow me to go to the cinema and I was too timid to disobey them. My elder brother seduced me to go. We forged some excuses, dodged the family and went to ODEAN to see an English picture. It was very entertaining but all the time I was afraid of "being seen"; at least, this was my feeling. My elder brother had grown bold. We returned home quite late. I was afraid that father might have seen us, but he had not. Our parents did not suspect us. And this opened up a new chapter in my life. Now I started going to cinema, very often, sometimes, alone, sometimes with my friends. I also frequented the restaurants and also indulged in other frivolous activities. The shell of my loneliness was broken now I moved in society and was proud of that. I was in this period of my life when Pakistan was established and our family shifted to Lahore. This increased our freedom and the pace of our social activities suddenly rose manifold.

In College life deepened this colour. Visits to movies and restaurants increased. Evenings were often spent on the Mall. Interest in literature increased and the novels I used to read portrayed the

life of those who believed in "Eat, drink and be merry." And these were the new values which I now started to in adherently uphold. I delighted in the idea that I was a liberal and progressive man—it is only now that I realise how silly that arrogance was.

In college my interest in serious reading was also aroused, chiefly because I wanted to improve my English. The first book I read was Jawarhar Lai Nehru's Autobiography. Nehru is an atheist and spurns religion as an opiate of the people. He is also a Marxist in his belief and approach. I was impressed by this book—it acted as a blow to some of my beliefs and sowed some suspicions in my mind, although these suspicions were not very vocal at that time. I also read J.S. Mill's "On Liberty" but did not fully understand that. Bertrand Russell was introduced to me by his essay on his personal philosophy in "I Believe" and this essay made me quite suspicious of the foundations of my belief— I was in these days loitering on the borderlines of atheism and communism.

I was eager to improve my English and read everything I could get. A friend gave me Maulana Muhammad Ali's "My Life: A Fragment." This book gave me some emotional consolation. I was in a confused state of mind. I wanted to believe in Islam; the things I read made me sceptical about my beliefs. Mohammad Ali's work was a defence of Islam, although not very rational and convincing. Nevertheless, it gave me some consolation. My condition can be best expressed by the famous Urdu couplet:

(I swim, like a straw, with every current of the sea and fail to recognize my true guide.)

But the moment came, and not very late, when I could recognize my guide. When I recapitulate this period I find a queer contradiction in my life. I professed to believe in Islam although some suspicions had raised their head. I offered my prayers not much irregularly. I used to observe fasts in Ramzan and along with all these lived a "happy-go-lucky" life, a few glimpses of which I have already given. I never realised this contradiction—it was much later that I became conscious of that.

I also feel that the social environment has played a mighty role in fashioning my life. My drift away from Islam - as far as its practical aspect was-concerned—was the result of two important factors.

1. Although the atmosphere of my home was religious, it was only traditionally so. Religion was a carcass without soul. It was not a dynamic force in our lives. It had a passive existence. No attempt was made to satisfy my intellectual cravings—I never thought that Islam could do that although I wished that it could! With the widening of my intellectual horizons, I felt a vacuum in my life. I thought that my beliefs were not grounded in reason. They cannot stand intellects, scrutiny. They are legends of the past, having no relevance to the throbbing problems of life. At least after reading Nehru, Russel and Mill, that was my impression!
2. I drifted away into a carefree life, shorn of moral scruples, because of a bad company and the social environment in which I now moved. My society was such that I unintentionally moved away in a certain direction thank God not too far.

Turn of the Tide

I came to Karachi in May 1949. Ensuing six months constitute the turning point in my life. My elder brother had been deeply impressed by a certain lecturer of D. J. College and had started

cooperating with Jamiat. Karachi Jamiat, in those days, used to hold weekly meetings which were often addressed by the said lecturer. I was also invited to a meeting. The topic for the day was “Philosophical background of Modern Europe.” I was impressed but only superficially, suspicions and doubts which had made inroads in my mind continued. What I gained was new association and later new friends, more brotherly than my real brothers.

Now I was introduced to the Islamic literature too. The first book I got was “Tanqeehat” by Syed Abul Ala Maudoodi. I read it with absorbing interest and felt as if the book was written for me only. It was to me, what a glass of cold water is to a thirsty person who is panting for breath. Then I read “Khutabat” and “Tafheemat” by the same author. Both of them were illuminating. C. E. M. Joad’s ‘Guide to Modern thought’ was suggested to me by the said lecturer and I read it. It was eye-opening. Now I was set along the road to serious-reading and read thoroughly all that I could. This study had a purifying effect on my ideas. Old doubts began to fade, old suspicions began to disappear. Next year I went to Lahore to attend the annual conference of Jamiat. When I saw the city of my old associations, my feelings were not much different from those which were expressed by Charles Dickens when he was speaking of his early memories of Rochester. For, was not Lahore, the place, where my early scepticism was born and bred? A scepticism I had innocently started to love and cherish. Dickens said:

“All my early readings and imaginations dated from this place, and I took them away so full of innocent construction and guileless belief, and I brought them back so worn and torn, so much the wiser and so much the worse,”

How true it looked

In Karachi my society was altogether changed. I can never forget the prudence with which the workers of Jamiat behaved with me, particularly Zafer Ishaq, Khurram Zubair and Anwar. They made me feel as if I was a part and parcel of their Organisation; an important limb of their body; although this was the period of my early acquaintance with them. I found, in them, a new, noble and loving society. The spirit of co-operation and mutual help filled the air. If I criticised them they never took ill of it. If I was rude, they never retaliated. They never asked me to do this and not to do that. They, by their behaviour and associations, made me feel that I was a member of a better society and left it to me to mend my ways. Jamiat overwhelmed me slowly and imperceptibly. I never realised that I was being contacted or dragged into a new society. I was veritably under a charm and a spell. And when I opened my eyes, I found myself a changed man—with new convictions, with new associates. Jamiat overtook me in the same way as a fowler catches the birds. I marched towards the net like the birds, out of my free will and conscious decision and never thought that I was being netted, but on finding myself in this fold, I had no regret for that, for I found that it was not a net, it was my own home—the lost paradise which I had now regained.

I am glad that I found the Guide I was searching for. And I regard myself as the happiest man. For has not Confucius said.

“If one hears the truth in the morning one may die in the evening without regret.”
