

Impressum

Klaus Bung: The Conversion (Mk1.5)

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^Editorial introduction

On 18 January 2002, the then Archbishop of Canterbury suggested that Muslims should read the Bible and Christians should read the Koran. This was not necessarily an inspired idea. Klaus Bung's story 'The Conversion' has some bearing on this question. In this story, one of two Muslim twin brothers from Bradford becomes a Christian. Some years later the two meet in order to decide once and for all which is the true faith. (Based on a German story by Johann Peter Hebel, 1760-1826.)

A fool-proof way of determining the true faith is shown in the story which "Wise Nathan" tells Sultan Saladin (1137-1193) in 12th century Jerusalem. It is part of a play by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), translated by Klaus Bung, and can be read in Rochdale Writers No 50.

**^Klaus Bung:
The conversion**

(with apologies to Johann Peter Hebel)

Two twin brothers, Yasin and Ali, lived in Bradford (1) and worked in their father's business in peace and harmony for many years, until Ali became a Christian and Yasin remained a Muslim. From that day onward they tormented each other as much as they could and their father's house was no more a house of peace (2). Eventually the father could not stand the bickering any longer, and he sent Ali to Liverpool where a business friend had offered him a job.

For many years there was no contact between Ali and Yasin, and Ali did not feel like coming home even for Eid (3), for he had now embraced the true faith, and he thought it was better to fast during Lent (4) than during Ramadan (5) and to celebrate Easter (6) rather than Eid.

But Ali felt lonely in the big city and especially away from his brother, even though he now had the true faith and worshipped the right God. So eventually he wrote a letter:



'Bhai, (7) I have been thinking how sad it is that we don't have the same religion and will not go to the same paradise, and perhaps to none. If you can make me into a Muslim again, I will be content, and if I can turn you into a Christian, that will be even better.'

Since Ali had to go to London on business and Yasin to Birmingham, they agreed to meet in Manchester, which was on the crossroads. 'That's where we will decide the issue.'

For several days they did not make any progress at all and might as well have been in Stormont (8) or Jerusalem (9). If Yasin said, 'God doesn't have a son, that's blasphemy', (10) Ali said, 'your Prophet had too many wives, and he was an impostor'. If Ali quoted Saint Paul (11), Yasin said, 'I have nothing against him but he wasn't Jesus and he wasn't one of the companions (12) of the Holy Prophet, so what does he know!'



But come Thursday, Yasin was sharing his brother's bacon (13). 'Brother,' he said, 'Denmark (14) is not as wicked as I thought'. On Friday Ali joined his brother in the Central Mosque for Namaaz-e-Juma'ah (15). 'Brother,' he said, 'your Imam (16) doesn't chant so badly after all.'

	
Manchester Cathedral	The King's Head

On Sunday they decided to go together first to the cathedral for Sung Eucharist (17) and then to Mosque for their namas (18). Then they would return home, listen to the voice of God, and whatever He would tell them, they would do.

But when they returned to their hotel from Evensong (19) and The King's Head (20), God admonished them, but they did not realise it.



The Bishop of Rochester,
Michael Nazir-Ali,
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Ali found an angry letter from his boss. 'This very instant you continue your trip to London. I am not paying your wages so that you can attend the World Parliament of Religions (21). You are not the Bishop of Durham (22) and even less the Bishop of Rochester (23). If you want to serve God, show our samples to our customers and do not talk semantics.' (24)

Yasin found a letter from his father: 'Bachá, (25) come home as fast as you can. Your mother is in hospital, I need your help in our shop, and they are asking for you at Mosque.'

So they parted the same evening without having settled the matter and each of them pondered what he had heard from the other.

Six weeks later Yasin wrote a letter to his brother: 'Dear Brother, your arguments have convinced me. Now I am a Christian like you. Mother doesn't mind, but Father is so angry that he never wants to see me again.'

Then Ali, overcome by pain and anger, rent his shirt and sent his brother an e-mail: 'Oh you vessel of divine wrath, (26) are you determined to race towards damnation by renouncing the true faith? Yesterday I returned to Islam.'

So it was that the Christian converted the Muslim, and the Muslim converted the Christian; and everything went on as before except that their resentment was greater.

'Vohi gadha, vohi palang', said the Imam and stroked his white beard: 'Same old donkey, same old saddle'.

Remember: Do not brood and speculate about religion, lest you lose the strength of your faith. Do not argue with people of different religions, least of all with people who know as little about it as you, and even less with scholars, for they try to overpower you by their learning and the artifice of their words and not by touching your heart. Instead live by your faith and do not make simple things complicated -- unless your conscience drives you to change.

Note: This story is based on, and partly translated from, the German story 'Die Bekehrung' (The conversion) by Johann Peter Hebel (1760-1826)

^Endnotes

- (01) Bradford, town in Yorkshire (England) with a large Muslim population
- (02) house of peace: Dar-as-Salaam
- (03) Eid: major Muslim festival celebrated at the end of Ramadan
- (04) Lent: the Christian forty days of 'fasting'
- (05) Ramadan: the Muslim month of fasting
- (06) Easter: the highest-ranking Christian festival, preceded by Lent, the period of fasting
- (07) Bhai: 'brother' (Urdu)
- (08) Stormont: seat of Parliament in Northern Ireland, for years the scene of much bitter quibbling and unsuccessful negotiations between Catholic and Protestant parties

(09) Jerusalem ('town of peace'): the scene of many intractable conflicts and negotiations between Jews (Israelis) and Muslims (Palestinians)

(10) blasphemy: The Koran condemns the Christian teaching that Jesus is the 'son of God' as a blasphemy:

'... admonish those who say that Allah has begotten a son. Surely of this they could have no knowledge, neither they nor their fathers: a monstrous blasphemy is that which they utter.' (Surah 18)

'Such was Jesus, the son of Mary. That is the whole truth, which they are unwilling to accept. Allah forbid that He Himself should beget a son!' (Surah 19: 90)

This is based on a literalist interpretation of the word 'son': to beget a son, the father must have sexual organs and must have used them in the traditional way. To imagine God engaged in such a vulgar activity is what is blasphemous in the notion that Jesus is the son of God. This interpretation ignores the fact that nowhere in the New Testament, nor anywhere else in Christian theology, is it suggested that God had sexual intercourse with the Virgin Mary, who, it is asserted, remained a virgin even after giving birth to Jesus. This latter doctrine shows clearly that the word 'son' does not have the usual anatomical implications.

(11) Saint Paul: author of the oldest parts of the New Testament, and most successful proselytiser for Christianity.

(12) companions: The companions of the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H.) were the first converts to Islam, who saw the Holy Prophet in the flesh. The most famous of these were Abu Bakr, the first Khalif, and Umar (Omar), the second Khalif. Their status is similar to that of the 12 Apostles in Christianity.

(13) bacon: Muslims are not allowed to eat pork. As a result of a long tradition even the thought of it fills them with genuine disgust, even more so than imagining somebody breaking the prohibition of drinking alcohol.

(14) Denmark: Much of the bacon consumed in England comes from Denmark.

(15) Namaas-e-Juma'ah: Namas = 'prayer' (Urdu), juma'ah = 'Friday' (Urdu). Namaas-e-Juma'ah are the Friday Prayers, the most important prayers of the week. Friday is the Muslim holy day.

(16) Imam: The Imam leads the prayers at mosque.

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- (17) Sung Eucharist: Solemn Sunday service in the Anglican church.
 - (18) namas: 'prayers' (Urdu) = 'salat' (Arabic)
 - (19) Evensong: evening prayers in the Anglican church
 - (20) The King's Head: popular name for English pubs, where alcohol is consumed (a corresponding German name is 'Der grüne Baum' [the green tree]).
 - (21) World Parliament of Religions: a series of international assemblies of representatives of many religions begun in Chicago in 1893, whose purpose it was to create greater understanding among different religions.
 - (22) Bishop of Durham: Dr David Jenkins (1925-2016), one-time Bishop of Durham (1984-1994), became famous (or infamous) for many of his learned and unorthodox views which interpreted Christian doctrine in a non-literalist way.

On the Virgin Birth he said: "I wouldn't put it past God to arrange a virgin birth if he wanted. But I don't think he did."

On the resurrection of Christ, he said: "The resurrection was not a single event, but a series of experiences that gradually convinced people that Jesus's life, power, purpose and personality were actually continuing." (BBC obituary, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-37093551>, retrieved 2024-12-02)

Once he used the words "bloody" and "damn" in a sermon and was banned from preaching in two of his own churches after complaints from members of the congregation. Source: "Bishop banned from pulpit for swearing", The Sunday Times, 2006-08-27 - <https://web.archive.org/web/20110604110530/http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article620772.ece> - Retrieved 2024-12-02

- (23) Bishop of Rochester: Michael Nazir-Ali (1949-), Anglican bishop of Rochester from 1994 to 2009. He was born in Pakistan to parents who converted from Islam to Roman Catholicism. As a teenager he became an Anglican. In 1994 he became Anglican Bishop of Rochester. In 2021 he converted to Roman Catholicism. Unlike David Jenkins he is conservative in his theological outlook (e.g. sexual morality, family attitudes).
- (24) semantics: academic discipline concerned with the meaning of words and language; popularly used in the sense of 'splitting hairs'
- (25) Bachá: 'my son' (Urdu)

- (26) vessel of divine wrath: (Bible, New Testament, letter of Paul to the Romans 9:22), a person predestined for eternal damnation

^The German original of this story

Johann Peter Hebel: Die Bekehrung

Zwei Brüder im Westfälinger Land lebten miteinander in Frieden und Liebe, bis einmal der jüngere lutherisch blieb und der ältere katholisch wurde. Als der jüngere lutherisch blieb und der ältere katholisch wurde, taten sie sich alles Herzeleid an. Zuletzt schickte der Vater den katholischen als Ladendiener in die Fremde. Erst nach einigen Jahren schrieb er zum ersten Mal an seinen Bruder. "Bruder", schrieb er, "es geht mir doch im Kopf herum, daß wir nicht einen Glauben haben und nicht in den nämlichen Himmel kommen sollen, vielleicht in gar keinen. Kannst du mich wieder lutherisch machen, wohl und gut, kann ich dich katholisch machen, desto besser." Also beschied er ihn in den "Roten Adler" nach Neuwied, wo er wegen einem Geschäft durchreiste. "Dort wollen wirs ausmachen." In den ersten Tagen kamen sie nicht weit miteinander. Schalt der Lutherische: "Der Papst ist der Antichrist", schalt der Katholische: "Luther ist der Widerchrist." Berief sich der Katholische auf den heiligen Augustin, sagte der Lutherische: "Ich hab nichts gegen ihn, er mag ein gelehrter Herr gewesen sein, aber beim ersten Pfingstfest zu Jerusalem war er nicht dabei." Aber am Samstag aß schon der Lutherische mit seinem Bruder Fastenspeise. "Bruder", sagte er, "der Stockfisch schmeckt nicht giftig zu den durchgeschlagenen Erbsen"; und abends ging schon der Katholische mit seinem Bruder in die lutherische Vesper. "Bruder", sagt er, "euer Schulmeister singt keinen schlechten Tremulant." Den andern Tag wollten sie miteinander zuerst in die Frühmesse, danach in die lutherische Predigt und was sie alsdann bis heut über acht Tage der liebe Gott vermahnt, das wollten sie tun. Als sie aber aus der Vesper und aus dem "Grünen Baum" nach Hause kamen, ermahnte sie Gott, aber sie verstanden es nicht. Denn der Ladendiener fand einen zornigen Brief von seinem Herrn. "Augenblicklich setzt Eure Reise fort! Hab ich Euch auf eine Tridenter Kirchenversammlung nach Neuwied geschickt, oder sollt Ihr nicht vielmehr die Musterkarte reiten?" Und der andere fand einen Brief von seinem Vater: "Lieber Sohn, komm heim, sobald du kannst, du mußt spielen." Also gingen sie noch den nämlichen Abend unverrichteter Sachen auseinander und dachten jeder für sich nach, was er von dem andern gehört hatte. Nach sechs Wochen schreibt der jüngere dem Ladendiener einen Brief: "Bruder, deine Gründe haben mich unterdessen vollkommen überzeugt. Ich bin jetzt auch katholisch. Den Eltern ist es insofern recht. Aber dem Vater darf ich nimmer unter die Augen kommen." Da ergriff der Bruder voll Schmerz und Unwillen die Feder. "Du Kind des Zorns und der Ungnade, willst du denn mit Gewalt in die Verdammnis rennen, daß du die seligmachende Religion verleugnest? Gestrigs Tags bin ich wieder lutherisch worden." Also hat der katholische Bruder den lutherischen bekehrt, und der lutherische hat den katholischen

bekehrt; und war nachher wieder wie vorher, höchstens ein wenig schlimmer.

Merke: Du sollst nicht über die Religion grübeln und tüfteln, damit du nicht deines Glaubens Kraft verlierst. Auch sollst du nicht mit Andersdenkenden darüber disputieren, am wenigsten mit solchen, die es ebensowenig verstehen als du, noch weniger mit Gelehrten, denn die besiegen dich durch ihre Gelehrsamkeit und Kunst, nicht durch deine Überzeugung. Sondern du sollst deines Glaubens leben und, was gerade ist, nicht krumm machen. Es sei dann, daß dich dein Gewissen selber treibt zu schanschieren.