

## **Dr Abu Bakr Fakier - A Rare Cape-Muslim Intellectual**

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Although not much has thus far been written about social reformers, famous *shuyukh*, and other Muslim personalities who made significant contributions at the Cape, attempts are being made to record these biographies and contributions. Amongst this group, the role of Dr. Abu Bakr Fakier cannot be ignored.

### **Studies & Influences:**

Abu Bakr Fakier, like Shaykh Armien Fakier, belongs to the fairly big Fakier family. He was from amongst the few but growing number of Muslims who pursued the western intellectual tradition with vigour and passion. During his student life in the 1950s (and later when he joined the teaching fraternity in the 1960s), he strongly identified with and participated in the Teacher's League of South Africa. He was also active in the Unity Movement alongside the late Advocate Bennie Kies and Mr. Dudley, former teacher at Livingstone High School. Having been influenced by these institutions and exposed to their leftist reading material, Abu Bakr grappled with their thoughts and practices. He did so because he was not fully satisfied with their ideas, and familiarised himself with the articles and books written by, amongst others, Shaykh Muhammad Abduh, Jamal ud-Din Al-Afghani, Sayed Qutb, Maulana Maududi, Ahmad Galwash and Maulana Muhammad Ali (the Ahmadi). The works of this crop of individuals, as well as the Quranic translations of Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Ali, helped to mould his critical mind and he did not readily accept

Marxist material at face value, as was the case with some of the other Muslim individuals of his time. Whilst busying himself with the writings of these Muslim scholars, he also critically perused the works of orientalists such as Hamilton Gibb, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Bernard Lewis. Abu Bakr was an independent thinker who critically responded to the ideas forwarded by the orientalists, as he had done with the Marxist intellectuals of his time. In the process, he also came into conflict with leading Shaykhs and Imams of the time; he frowned upon the learning of many of the Shaykhs who, he felt, were intellectually bankrupt and impotent.

He, however, admired and respected a few; some for their learning and others for their preparedness to learn. He showed respect for individuals such as Shaykh Salih Dien, who was a graduate of the American University of Cairo and was exposed to the teaching of Shaykhs from Al-Azhar University. The person who he deeply felt for and spoke about with sincerity was his close companion and friend, Imam Abdullah Haron (d.1969). The latter's openness to learn and to disseminate workable ideas were, according to Abu Bakr, not to be found amongst most of the contemporary religious leadership. The week before Abu Bakr's death, he still spoke well of the Imam and particularly of the Imam's vision. Many who were in the company of the Imam and Abu Bakr witnessed the manner in which the two men debated socio-political and religious issues.

Abu Bakr's studied via correspondence at the University of South Africa, where he majored in History, English and Arabic. He completed his degree in the 1960s and always encouraged Muslim students to pursue Arabic and Islamic studies at institutions such as McGill University (Canada) or the University of London's School

of Oriental and African Studies, where scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Hamilton Gibb were plying their trade. It was, in fact, his dream to do that himself. Unfortunately for him, personal circumstances in the 1970s hindered him from moving in that direction. He continued at UNISA and switched to legal studies, in which he excelled, but was however unable to complete.

### **His Projects and Contributions**

Despite his unavoidable personal position, he embarked upon projects that in many ways demonstrated his concern for community affairs and with injecting quality Islamic education into Cape Muslim society. One of the first exciting innovations at the Cape was the presentation of what came to be referred to as 'The English Sermon.' Abu Bakr, with the support of Shaykh Salih Dien who was then the presiding Imam at Masjid us-Salam in the Athlone area (Cape Town), adopted the idea of presenting the major part of the Friday sermon in English. Although he and Shaykh Dien were severely criticised for this by the community and especially by the conservative clergy attached to the Muslim Judicial Council, they successfully introduced these presentations at their respective mosques with added support from legal opinions received from Al-Azhar University. It was unfortunate that those who took over the running of the Al-Jamia Mosque, after Abu Bakr left in the mid 1970s, decided to go back to the conservative manner of presenting the sermon.

During this time he set up a small printing press at his house in Penlyn Estate, and began to prepare useful texts for the Muslim schools. The first was a well prepared and clearly explained book entitled *The Creed of Islam* (1974). Even though the book was not widely circulated, because of its price and because of the limited number of

copies printed, its pedagogical presentation cannot be overlooked. It should not be forgotten that many of the books or booklets prepared by the local Shaykhs and Imams were in a poor state in terms of their presentation and language usage. Abu Bakr's tastes were different and he tried to design and publish attractive texts that could act as 'model publications.' The second book to appear in the market was *Read and Learn Arabic*. This was another innovative piece of work by Abu Bakr Fakier. He presented the learning of Arabic through a colour-coded text. There was nothing like it at the time and even though it was well received not many showed a great deal of interest in learning Arabic nor in purchasing the book. However, the third book penned by Abu Bakr has till today remained in demand. This was *The Manual of Prayer and Fasting*. The late Professor Habib ul-Haq Nadvi, who had joined the University of Durban-Westville to head the now defunct Department of Arabic, Urdu & Persian, lauded the book in his lengthy introduction and went so far as to compare it to Shaykh Abu Bakr Effendi's basic jurisprudential text entitled *Bayan ud-Din*, which was written in Arabic-Afrikaans in the late 1880s at the Cape. The book has gone through many prints and limited copies are available. All of these texts were publications of the Institute of Islamic Studies, which he established in the early 1970s.

This institute was then based at the Claremont Al-Jamia Mosque where Imam Haron was resident Imam until his detention on the 28<sup>th</sup> of May 1969/ 12<sup>th</sup> Rabi al-Awwal. It offered courses in subjects such as Islamic History and Islamic Law. He drafted interesting notes and prescribed the most recent books on the subject at that time so as to expose the (adult) students to various types of texts on the subject matter. The Institute was not successful because of the high standards that he had set and the type

of courses he had offered. Another reason was that a congregational squabble broke out not long after the establishment of the institute. As a consequence, Abu Bakr and those who supported him were forced by the Shah Mohamed Trust trustee to leave Al-Jamia Mosque. They later moved to the Claremont Main Road Mosque after having been persuaded by Mr. Ahmad Savahl, a mosque committee trustee, to fight the case against Shaykhs Abdullah and Cassiem Abderouf respectively. After he assisted the committee in the case and won the legal battle on their behalf, Abu Bakr was asked to be an Imam. He reluctantly filled that position until Imam Hasan Solomons, who is currently an ANC member of parliament, and Imam Rashied Omar, who is pursuing his doctorate studies at the University of Notre Dame, were able to take over these obligations.

### **Teaching and Interest:**

Towards the end of the 1970s Abu Bakr became acquainted with Dr. Abdullah Umar Naseef, who was then the Vice-Chancellor and Rector of King Abdul-Aziz University (KAU). Through the latter's friendship and generosity Abu Bakr and his family were lured to Jeddah in the early part of 1980. His purpose of going to Saudi Arabia was to pursue *Shariah* studies; Abu Bakr was one of those individuals who was obsessed with the subject and had read all the works in English on the topic. He was totally immersed in the subject and always desired to write a standard work on '*Human Rights in Islam.*' Although he was accepted to take up post-graduate studies in the Faculty of *Shariah* Studies at Umm ul-Qura University in Mecca, he was eventually persuaded by some of Dr. Naseef's colleagues in the other faculties to keep him at KAU so that he could teach English. In the end he accepted their offer and remained at KAU until he retired in 2001. However, during the time he was there he immersed

himself in reading all the classical works in Islamic Studies and at the same time pursued his MA in English Studies at KAU and later his doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania; his doctorate thesis focused on Ralph Waldo Emerson (d. 1882), who was an important American poet, author, visionary and transcendentalist.

Even though he was attached to the department, his mind was set on studying Islamic law and specifically '*Human Rights in Islam.*' At one stage whilst in Saudi Arabia, he was attracted to the International Islamic University of Malaysia where Professor Kamali was (and still is) a prominent specialist in Islamic law. But because of his circumstances he stayed at KAU and registered with the University of London where he was about to complete his life's work on '*Human Rights in Islam.*' Prior to his death he indicated that he still had two chapters outstanding to round off his thesis and that he also had another manuscript ready for print, namely *A Manual on the Hajj*; it is indeed a pity that these works have not been completed or published before his death. If he had been around for a little while longer, these writings would have been completed and more would have come of his critical pen. Allah knows best and may He have mercy on Dr. Abu Bakr's soul.