

A Challenge

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On December 27, 1960, Tom Keogh, Peter Jones and I, three young Australian Jesuits, sailed out of Melbourne on our way to the Hazaribag Mission of the Australian Jesuits, situated in the state of Bihar, India. We were all sent to St Xavier's School in Hazaribag, where we were kept very busy. For example, I had a dormitory of about forty boys to look after. I also had charge of the sports activities of an age group. We all took turns supervising study periods, meals and moving around the grounds during break periods. I also had twenty-six periods to teach. My additional jobs were scout master; in charge of liturgy for the Catholic boys; and also in charge of the Jesuit community library. My life was fully devoted to the service of the boys.

There was, however, a problem. I had envisioned my task as a missionary to be telling people about Jesus, and that was precisely what we young scholastics were forbidden to do. In seventh grade, everyone studied *The Saviour*, a life of Christ – and that was it! The only other public acknowledgement of Jesus was during Mass each morning for the Christian boys. The obvious question that began to trouble me was, “What am I doing here?” What was the point of being a missionary who was told not to talk about Jesus to Hindu and Muslim boys?

With these thoughts running through my mind, Tony Ryan and I took a group of hostel boys by train to Calcutta in December 1963, after I had been three years at St Xavier's. It was there that I heard Fr Putz, a theological expert at Vatican II, say that Pope John XXIII had said that the Church, after the Council of Trent, was like a fortress on a hilltop defending itself. He said the Church should open all its doors and windows and reach out to all groups of people. I reflected that no one in Hazaribag was reaching out to Muslims as such and said to myself: “Let me try to do something”.

Therein lay the challenge of trying to work out what that ‘something’ could possibly be! Tony and I went back to Hazaribag for Christmas and returned to Calcutta in January to take the boys back. While we were there, anti-Muslim riots broke out in some parts of the city. We could see smoke rising in a few places while standing on the roof of St Xavier's College. Tony and I decided to try to reach the station in case some boys did turn up to catch the train for our return journey. On the way there, we saw smouldering fires but no bodies. A number of boys did turn up. We had a reserved carriage to ourselves. Apart from two brothers who were Muslims, all the other boys were Hindus. They told the brothers to get under the seat and they put some luggage in front of them.

Sure enough, we were stopped by a Hindu mob. The boys shouted out that they were all Hindus and we were allowed to go. Some boys told me they had seen bodies beside the railway lines as they were coming by suburban trains to the main station. Later on, we told the brothers that they could come out. I had learned that Muslims were on the receiving end! It only served to strengthen my resolve to try to do something for them.

I started reading about Islam and tried to be as friendly as possible with some Muslim boys in my care. That was a start. While I was in Ranchi studying Hindi, I read the entire collection of *Notes on Islam* by Fr Victor Courtois, a Belgian Jesuit in Calcutta. During my theological studies in Kurseong, I tried to learn as much Hebrew and Greek, the languages of the Bible, as possible. This was because any Muslim scholar knows the Quran in Arabic,

the original language, and I would be expected to know something about the languages of the Bible. I also used to go twice a week to teach English by the direct method to little boys in a mosque school and then have an Urdu lesson with their teacher, followed by another one with an Urdu teacher.

After completing my theological studies, my first assignment was to Hazaribag parish. About a month later, I was shifted to Maheshmunda to take charge of a Hindi-medium middle school and also be the chaplain to a community of sisters and say Sunday Mass for parishioners in Giridih. From Maheshmunda, I was moved to our Hindi-medium High School in remote Mahuadanr as teacher, hostel-in-charge and games master. When my father was dying in 1971, I was sent back to be with him for some time. On my return, I was put in parish work in Mahuadanr. Finally, due to the generosity of Fr Bernie Donnelly, I was allowed to go for studies.

I wanted to do a B.A. in Urdu and decided to check Aligarh Muslim University, Delhi University and Lucknow University. At Aligarh, I promptly had a severe attack of asthma, so that was the end of doing any studies there! I was admitted to Holy Family Hospital, New Delhi, and quickly recovered. It was suggested I stay with the Salesians, just across the road from the hospital, and study at Jamia Millia Islamia, a short distance down the road. Mujeeb Sahib, the Vice Chancellor, welcomed me and pointed out that my desire to get a B.A. in Urdu was not realistic, whereas I could do an M.A. in Medieval Indian History. This is what I ended up doing, but I also did a Diploma in Urdu from Delhi University.

A conference I attended in Delhi made me realize that Sufis, Muslim saints, brought people together, and I decided to do a doctoral study on a Sufi of North India. For this I would need Persian, so I went to Iran and studied Persian for a year in Shiraz. I could not stay long enough to get any formal degree, but I became fluent in spoken Persian and studied classical Persian. It was while I was there that Christian Troll informed me about a great Sufi of Bihar, Sharafuddin Maneri. I read up about him and decided that he was definitely the man for me. Simon Digby, a respected English scholar of Indian History, recommended I try to work with Professor Syed Hasan Askari in Patna.

I met Askari Sahib in Patna in March 1976, and he agreed to help me, but did not consent to be my guide. Qeyamuddin Ahmad, a friend of his, convinced him to become my official guide, which was the arrangement when I went to Patna on the last Sunday of June, 1976. As I sat in the bus, I had two fears. The first was that I might be biting off more than I could chew. In other words, I would not be able to handle all those Persian manuscripts, so essential for a thesis. My second concern was what I would do if I came to doubt that Sharafuddin Maneri was a great saint, as the Muslims of Bihar believed. The answer to that was quite simple: I would cease my doctoral studies.

Lurking beneath this question was a much deeper, longer-standing one. It had been necessary for me to look objectively at myself as a Jesuit from Australia, with my particular personality, competence and health, but also with an innate desire to write something deep and meaningful. As I had been reflecting on my options, it seemed to me that truly meaningful work would have to begin either at the bottom or the top. By this I meant beginning at village level, where the vast majority of Muslims lived. The initial step, of course, would be to get to know them through interacting with them, and then doing whatever seemed best. The other option was the one I was attempting to do, which was to make known to the world, through my study and translations, the spiritual riches of

the Muslims of Bihar, as found in the life and teaching of Sharafuddin Maneri, their most revered Sufi saint.

One of the criteria favoured by St Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits, for choosing worthwhile work, was “the more universal, the more divine”. This kept coming back to me. On the other hand, there were many practical difficulties regarding my working at the village level. Moreover, I felt no calling to do that sort of work, whereas I had nurtured a desire to write “something deep and meaningful” ever since I had been helped by the writings of an American Jesuit, Fr Daniel A. Lord, while still at school.

A formal meeting with the Regional Superior and three of his consultants was held in March 1976. It lasted three hours. Every possible question was raised and discussed. Finally, it was concluded that I should do the doctoral study of Maneri, based on the original Persian manuscripts that were found in the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna. It was after this decision had been taken that I had gone to Patna in March and met Askari Sahib. I was also welcomed to stay at St Xavier’s School, the nearest Jesuit community to the Library.

Thus it was that I finally had a Persian manuscript open before me in the Khuda Bakhsh library, trying to decipher what I saw there. Modern printed Persian books provide you with separate words, as in English books, and also punctuation, as helps to comprehend what was written. Ancient Persian manuscripts, however, contain no separate words or punctuation to mark the sentences, and no paragraphs. They consist of one letter after another. The reader is supposed to decipher the words and imagine punctuation, sentence structure and so on in his or her own mind. I had read printed Persian in Shiraz, but this was a whole new ball game. It was bewildering.

With Askari Sahib’s help, I gradually came to unravel what lay before me. Reading manuscripts was always a challenging, time-consuming task. If it had not been for Askari Sahib’s unstinting assistance, I doubt I could have continued. With his help, however, my first fear disappeared. Moreover, as I slowly deciphered Maneri’s own words, it became clear to me that he was indeed a genuine saint, scholar and spiritual guide. Long years of study only served to reinforce this conviction.

My thesis was on Maneri’s life and teaching and I had imagined that I would be able to go through his *Hundred Letters*, the first and most complete expression of his teaching, and pick out the salient points. Confronted with the reality of the manuscript, however, I realized the only viable option was to translate the entire text. This would then enable me to work out what he had taught. Askari Sahib agreed with this course of action. I thought the translation would be finished by Christmas, 1976, but it was actually completed on January 25 – 1978!

Askari Sahib then pulled a surprise on me. “Publish it!” he said. “But I’d have to revise it,” I replied. “I’ll help you,” he said and that was the end of the discussion. The revision process took another three months, one of which involved cycling daily to the home of Balkhi Sahib, who possessed the oldest known manuscript of the work. This enabled me to clarify any misgivings I had about some words in the manuscript I had been using. I was determined to produce as accurate a translation as possible.

The next step was a long and agonizing effort to find a publisher due to the fact that both Maneri and I were unknown quantities in the field of Sufi studies. The translation was eventually accepted by Paulist Press, New Jersey, for publication in their prestigious

sixty-volume series, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*. I received my first three copies on March 5, 1980.

In the meantime, I was working on finding as much information as possible about Maneri and his life, mainly from the accounts of what transpired in the assemblies over which he regularly presided. He was a born teacher, who illustrated his teaching with stories about the Prophet of Islam and his companions, and also with Sufi stories. Occasionally, he used personal reminiscences to illustrate a point. He had an excellent memory. With Askari Sahib's assistance, these reminiscences were hunted down in the manuscripts and then translated by me.

Using the accepted history of the period, my task was to fit the historical data contained in the reminiscences into this time frame. For example, if we know that Sultan Shamsuddin Firuz Shah died in 1322, then we know that a reminiscence about his death refers to this period and shows that Maneri was in Sonargaon at the time. Many more detailed reminiscences of the Sultan (1301-1322) make this fact abundantly clear. From this I worked out a time frame, dating his birth around 1290. His death occurred on January 2, 1381, when he was about 90 years of age, as is clearly recorded in the *Wafat Nama*.

My examiners were Prof. Annemarie Schimmel, the world's leading expert on Sufism; Prof. K.A. Nizami, of all-India renown; and Askari Sahib, the master of the history of Mediaeval Bihar. They concurred with my findings, and a doctorate was awarded for the thesis, even though it goes against the popular story that Maneri was born in 1263, making him about 117 when he died. Basically, I disagreed with the accepted chronology of the first half of his life, but the second half is clearly documented.

Because of the publication of Maneri's *Hundred Letters*, it was decided that I should remain in Patna and continue translating his writings. My Superior in Patna accepted my suggestion to give an introductory course on Islam to Jesuit Juniors, young men who had just completed their two-year novitiate training. I quickly discovered that most of them were biased against Muslims and were far from being receptive to an objective presentation of Islam. My solution was to get them all to write down three positive points and three negative points about Muslims. I then put them in groups of five and told them to discuss all their points and agree on what they, as a group, thought were genuine positive and negative points. They were all then brought together and I put a list of their positive and negative points on the board. We then had a discussion about each point to see how true or false it was. This cleared the air, and I was able to present an introductory outline.

This was the era when students 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 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 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.

A second heart attack in 2009, followed by triple by-pass surgery and the insertion of an ICD, put an end to my translating and teaching work. I did manage to edit the translation I had been working on and have it published as *A Mine of Meaning*. After hoping for a whole year to return to translating, I finally had to admit that it was beyond me and my superior transferred me to our house for retired Jesuits. Before leaving, I put twenty-six diaries, a number of photo albums, many of my articles, as well as a large number of my letters into a large trunk and told my superior he could either put the trunk in the province archives or burn the contents. I thought I would not be long for this world and had no desire to write about myself.

Due to my nephew's urging, however, I asked for the trunk and, utilizing my diaries, wrote an autobiography, *Crossing Barriers: A Jesuit Encounters a Sufi in India*. It has not as yet been published. A portion of another book was revised and published as *Guided by Maneri*, as was an unpublished manuscript, *A Jesuit Among Sufis*. A felicitation volume also came out in my honour. Nowadays, I have the joy of writing articles, mainly aimed at Christian and Muslim readers, as I draw from both Christian, particularly Ignatian, sources and, almost exclusively, from Maneri's writings for the Muslim input.

Thanks be to God, who did enable me to do 'something'.