
The Legacy of Karl Gottlieb Pfander

Clinton Bennett

Karl Gottlieb Pfander has been described as the “foremost champion of his age” in the assault upon “the embattled forces of the False Prophet.”¹ One of his own converts, Imad-ud-Din (d. 1901), thought that Pfander had definitively demonstrated Islam’s inferiority and falsehood: “We can now, I think, say that the controversy has virtually been complete . . . [that] the Christians have obtained a complete victory, while our opponents have been signally defeated.”² After tracing Pfander’s missionary career and examining his approach to Islam, we shall briefly appraise his legacy, arguing, as Lyle L. Vander Werff has suggested, that Christian mission to Islam after Pfander has either continued, reacted against, or modified his approach. Therefore, whether one accepts or rejects that approach, Pfander’s work “stands as a vital link in the formation of a Christian apology to Muslims.”³

Childhood and Education

Pfander was born in 1803 in Waiblingen, Saxony, where his parents, leading members of the local pietist congregation, ran

the village bakery. At twelve, Pfander entered Latin school; at sixteen, the Moravian Academy at Stuttgart. Already his childhood reading of literature from the Basel Mission had influenced him to think of becoming a missionary. The mission saw itself as a spiritual society, a fellowship within the universal church dedicated to uniting pietist Christians, whether Lutheran, Moravian, or Reformed, in commitment to mission and evangelism. The dominant theological theme of Pietism was the need for individual repentance and renewal, beginning with consciousness of one’s own sin. Only such a process of spiritual discovery could result in salvation. For the pietists, the Bible was the sole source of authority, and its study formed the central plank in the curriculum at their mission training college in Basel (established 1815). The historical-critical method of F. C. Baur (1792–1860), D. F. Strauss (1808–74), and others made no impact at all on the pietists’ understanding of biblical truth. W. M. L. de Wette’s lectures at Basel University, where he was professor of theology from 1822 to 1849, were out of bounds for students of the missionary college.⁴ This period predates the “verbal inerrancy” language of nineteenth-century fundamentalism, but this was how the pietists viewed the Bible—as an inspired, infallible, inerrant guide to Christian teaching, life, and work. Nor did the arguments of the philosophers and theologians for and against deism appeal to them; revelation was more important than reason and logic. Only faith mattered.

Pfander offered himself to the society at seventeen, entering the Basel college in 1820. Alongside Bible study, with emphasis on original languages, went instruction in Arabic and on the

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Qur'an. The society, whose first missionaries worked in Muslim areas, had early identified mission to Muslims as a priority. Christian Gottlieb Blumhardt (1779–1838) lectured on the Qur'an for five hours each week, while a professor from Basel University taught Arabic. Basel students also received instruction in a skilled manual trade; financial independence became a hallmark of many of the Christian communities nurtured by Basel missionaries. Pfander clearly left Basel with some knowledge of Islam, which, based primarily on the Qur'an, was probably more accurate than that of many of his contemporaries, who relied only on European sources.

Missionary in Armenia

In 1825, after completing his course, Pfander was ordained in Lutheran orders and stationed at Shusha, the provincial capital of Karabagh in Russian Armenia. Some colleagues concentrated on reforming the Armenian Orthodox Church, which they believed was corrupt, and therefore salvifically bankrupt (about one-third of the local population were Armenian Christians), but Pfander quickly turned his attention to attempting to communicate the Gospel to Muslims (about two-thirds of the local population). He believed that if Muslims read the New Testament in Persian, their preferred language, they would automatically acknowledge "its truth and superiority" and would abandon Islam as incapable of removing the burden of sin.⁵ To master Persian, Pfander made several excursions into Iran and also spent a year in Baghdad. He began to write works of Christian apology that, he believed, would convince Muslims of Christianity's ineffable superiority. He was well aware that this type of apologia, of Islam to Christians and of Christianity to Muslims, had a long history, but he saw his books as breaking new ground, perhaps in terms of scholarly accuracy, though more probably by attempting to inculturate the Gospel within the linguistic and cultural worlds of his Muslim readers. In this, he succeeded, since not a few Muslim readers thought his books had been written by an apostate Muslim.⁶ Pfander also knew Henry Martyn's *Controversial Tracts*, although any influence "remains conjectural in detail."⁷ The German manuscript of his first book, the *Mizan-al-haqq* (Balance of Truth), was completed in 1829. Much of his later work was devoted to revising and to translating this first book and its two sequels, *Miftah-al-asrar* (Key of Mysteries) and *Tariq-al-hayat* (Way of Life) into other languages. W. A. Rice commented, "Dr. Pfander was 40 years perfecting his controversial works."⁸ In 1831 the *Mizan* appeared in Armenian; in 1835, in Persian.

In 1833 Pfander received permission from the Basel Mission to take some European leave, mainly because he wanted to find a wife. Perhaps expressing a commitment to acculturation, both he and the society appear to have preferred a Russian wife. He was allowed to go first to Moscow and, if unable to find a bride there, was then to try his luck in Saxony. As it happened, he found a suitable match in Moscow—Sophia Reuss, daughter of a minor aristocrat. They married, briefly visited Pfander's family in Saxony, then joined the Shusha Mission. Sadly, 1835 was a tragic year. Sophia fell ill and died, while the mission ran foul of the Russian authorities. Some accounts of this development hint that Pfander's efforts to convert Muslims were to blame, but the incident appears to have been initiated by the Armenian archbishop, who, somewhat annoyed when two young deacons requested instruction at the mission, removed them to a monastery and petitioned the czar to expel the missionaries. Pfander became a jobless widower.⁹

Anglican Missionary in India

Pfander's interest in Islam suggested a stationing in a Muslim country. After visiting Turkey, he was instructed to proceed to Calcutta to explore possibilities of working in a predominantly Muslim part of India. Although the Basel Mission was not operating in any of these areas, several Basel missionaries were already employed by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), a voluntary agency within the Church of England. In Calcutta, Pfander studied Urdu and negotiated employment with the CMS. This proved a lengthy process, involving correspondence between the home headquarters of the two mission bodies. Finally in 1840 the CMS posted him to its Agra Mission. Meanwhile, he worked on the Urdu version of the *Mizan* (published in 1843) and on his *Remarks on the Nature of Mohammedanism* (1840). In 1841 he met and married Miss Elizabeth Emma Swinbourne, who had arrived in India the previous year, designated by the CMS for evangelism among women.¹⁰ The Pfanders ultimately had three sons and three daughters.

Most of Pfander's energy was devoted to language and translation work and to developing his refutation of Islam. Bishop Stephen Neill has described the *Mizan* as "one of the earliest works of Christian learning in the field" of Islamic scholarship,¹¹ while the Basel Mission historian P. Eppler refers to Pfander's "extensive and penetrating knowledge of Islam."¹² One of his most enthusiastic admirers, Sir William Muir (1819–1905), however, thought that he made too little use of "the historical deductions of modern research."¹³ Pfander does not qualify as a full-blown scholar of Islam, although he was willing to allow observation to modify his views and, in later editions of the *Mizan*, included references to the pioneering work of Gustav Weil (1808–89), one of the first European scholars to apply the historical-critical method to Muhammad's life. Weil's *Mohammed der Prophet* was published in 1843, his translation of Ibn Hisham (an early biography of Muhammad) in 1864. Weil pictured Muhammad as a deluded epileptic, a diagnosis that subsequently appeared in many nineteenth-century books about Islam. Pfander accepted, and repeated, this explanation of Muhammad's trances. Muhammad's "general conduct shows him to have been an acute and subtle man, yet some of his actions are like those of other unstable minds."¹⁴ Islam's military success, with its "spoil, dominion and prosperity," enabled Muhammad's companions to "shut their minds to his faults and failings."¹⁵ Among these failings, Pfander included Muhammad's multiple marriages and his treatment of conquered foes. Pfander's *Remarks* include such standard explanations of Islam's success as the allure of its promise of a sensual paradise. Generally, said Pfander, Islam was a religion of the sword, Christianity, one of peace. He also shared the suspicion of most orientalist scholars of the Hadith (Traditions) as largely fictitious and historically unreliable.¹⁶

We can best gain an understanding of the flavor of Pfander's writing by summarizing the *Mizan's* argument. The introduction establishes the ground rules for the following three sections. First, Pfander proposes that, since both Islam and Christianity claim to be God's final revelation, one must be right, one wrong. Logic demands, he says, that both cannot be right. Therefore, their respective claims should be tried at the bar of reason. Next, he establishes five a priori conditions of the true faith: (1) the true faith must fulfill the human yearning for pardon and justification; (2) it must contravene neither conscience nor natural morality; (3) its God must be just and holy, rewarding the good, punishing the evil; (4) its God must be one, immortal, immutable,

omnipotent, omniscient; and (5) the way of salvation must be made clear through gradual progress in the knowledge of God; a theophany (revelation) must stand at its center. Section 1 examines the Bible, rejecting traditional Muslim charges of abrogation (*naksh*) and of corruption (*tahrif*). Section 2 presents Christian doctrines within the framework of his criteria, establishing their rational basis. Section 3 tests Islam's claim and finds it wanting. Readers thus have a choice: between the Lord Jesus Christ, who went about doing good, and Muhammad the prophet of the sword.

Pfander's pietist background colors his approach. His aim is clearly to satisfy people's "spiritual cravings" for forgiveness, renewal, and fellowship with God, but his criteria and tests appear to elevate reason above feeling. Although, in early editions, he emphatically rejected reason as a means to obtain knowledge of God, in later editions he seems to argue more from reason than from revelation, which, given his pietist background, remains something of an enigma.¹⁷ As one subsequent critic says, he wrote not "to touch Muslim hearts but to convince their minds."¹⁸ Even William Muir thought he wrote of the Trinity as reflected in the natural world's examples of plurality in unity, so that this seemed to be "an obligatory argument, as if from the nature of things Deity must exist in trinity," which gave his opponents "unfounded advantage."¹⁹

The Debate

At Agra, Pfander's sequels to his *Mizan* were rendered into Urdu. All three books were widely distributed. Not only their style and idiom but also their binding were designed to resemble popular Muslim tracts. Muslims soon began responding to his arguments with letters, pamphlets, and articles in the Urdu press. Some of this correspondence appeared between January and August 1845 in the *Khair khwah-i-Hind* newspaper. More substantial Muslim rejoinders quickly followed. Sir William Muir described this controversy in an article first written in 1845, later revised; the most scholarly account of the exchange is by Avril Powell. Pfander's own response was his *Hall al-ishkal* (Solution of difficulties), published in 1847. In 1854, after a decade of literary exchange (and one private debate with the ulema in his own bungalow), one of the leading Muslim respondents, Rahmat Ali (1818–91), invited Pfander to join him in a public debate, or *munazara*, of which there was an age-long Muslim tradition. Less than half a century earlier, Henry Martyn had reluctantly accepted the same challenge. In sixteenth-century Agra, Jesuit missionaries had debated alongside representatives of other religions in the court of Emperor Akbar. Perhaps, though, all these debates took their cue from the very earliest period of exchange between Christian theologians and Muslim *mutakallimun*, in Syria in the seventh and eighth centuries, such as the famous debate between the Nestorian Catholicos Mar Timothy (in office 780–823) and Caliph Al-Mahdi (in office 755–85). As had Martyn, Pfander expressed reservations about this type of debate. "I was well aware," he wrote to the CMS, "that very little good is done by such public discussion," although he also welcomed the fact, as he saw it, that "Mohammedans should try to support their religion by proof, and not by the sword."²⁰ Nevertheless, he thought it prudent to accept their challenge.

The principal disputants, Pfander and Rahmat Ali, were each supported by a second and by a small team of assistants. Pfander chose as his second the young Cambridge graduate Thomas Valpy French (1825–91), afterward first bishop of Lahore.

William Kay (1820–86), later principal of Bishop's College, Calcutta, assisted. Rahmat Ali chose Dr. Wazir Khan as his second, and several assistants, including Imad-ud-Din. Also present was Safdar Ali, a civil servant. Other distinguished Muslims and Christians gave moral support, the latter including such influential government officials as Sir William Muir, secretary of the local CMS Association, and Judge Mosley Smith. Before the debate, the subjects for discussion were agreed by both sides: the abrogation and corruption of the Christian Scriptures, the doctrine of the Trinity, Muhammad's claim to prophethood, and the inspiration of the Qur'an. Pfander thought he was on familiar ground, since these were the subjects addressed in his apologetics. What he was not prepared for, though perhaps he should have been from the contents of *Kitab-i-istiftsar*, one of the more scholarly replies to his writing, was his opponents' use of European biblical critics to impugn the integrity and historicity of Christian Scripture. Wazir Khan, while a medical student in London in the 1840s, came "into contact with European works of Biblical criticism . . . and studied Hebrew and Greek."²¹ He read T. H. Horne (1780–1862), J. G. Eichorn (1752–1827), and N. Lardner (1648–1768) and brought some of their books with him to the debate, including George Elliot's 1847 translation of D. F. Strauss's *Das Leben Jesus*, of which Pfander knew nothing. During the debate, Pfander found it impossible not to admit to more discrepancies between the four Gospels than could be explained (as in his writing) by mere copyist error, but he continued to insist that "the essential doctrines, including the Trinity, and those concerning divinity, atonement and intercession, were unharmed by such an admission." His disputants found Pfander's argument that the New Testament had not abrogated but fulfilled the Old Testament by transforming its Hebrew ritual into inner

Pfander was unprepared for his Muslim opponent's use of European works of biblical criticism.

principles quite untenable. This "only struck his audience as mere evasion of an unpalatable fact"—that, in its turn, the New Testament had been replaced by the Qur'an.²²

Pfander accused Roman Catholic missionaries of sabotaging the proceedings by supplying his opponents with these works, which he, and a whole subsequent generation of evangelical missionaries, continued to dismiss as infidel. E. M. Wherry (1843–1927) wrote, "The Muslims were obliged to abandon their own works and endeavoured to save the day by a counter assault, in which they scrupled not to use the stock arguments of European infidelity in their effort to overthrow the authority of the Christian scriptures."²³ Both sides claimed victory, but as Avril Powell points out, while those Christians present were remarkably silent about the whole incident, Muslim accounts rolled off the presses.²⁴ No detailed account flowed from Muir's pen, who had so enthusiastically supported Pfander's earlier exchanges.

Final Years

Soon after the *munazara*, Pfander was transferred to Peshawar, which Powell describes as a "diplomatic move on the part of the

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CMS authorities on news of the debacle reaching Calcutta.²⁵ However, there is no real evidence that the CMS lost confidence in Pfander or disapproved of his attitude toward Islam. Indeed, Pfander was honored in 1856 with the Lambeth doctor of divinity degree in recognition of his endeavors to convert Muslims and, in the same year, was ordained in Anglican orders by the bishop of Calcutta. The subsequent conversion, too, of Safdar Ali (1864), although he did not directly ascribe his conversion to Pfander's efforts, and of Imad-ud-Din (1866), who did acknowledge Pfander's influence, were claimed as long-term proof of Pfander's victory.

Pfander remained in India until 1861, when he was appointed to help fellow Basel graduate S. W. Koelle (d. 1902) establish the CMS mission at Istanbul, a city already familiar to him from earlier travels. Perhaps predictably, Pfander's strategy was once again to distribute his books, which he did even in the "precincts of the Great Mosque of St. Sophia, the once famous church whose walls had . . . heard the eloquence of Chrysostom."²⁶ His Turkish edition of the *Mizan* appeared in 1861. Throughout his career, even during the violent events in India of 1857–58, he always preached in public places. "Bible in hand, as usual, he took his stand on a bridge or in a thoroughfare, and alike without boasting and without fear, proclaimed the truth and beauty of Christianity while the empire of the Christians in India was trembling in the balance."²⁷

Interestingly, Rahmat Ali was actively involved on the rebels side and fled India for Mecca with a price on his head. Pfander himself believed that the rebellion was Muslim inspired and led. Certainly, both Hindus and Muslims resented not only the imperialists' presence in India but also their hostility toward Indian culture, including its religion. Lord Macaulay's infamous memo of 1835 suggests that scholars shared this negativity toward anything Indian.²⁸ Although the East India Company claimed a policy of religious neutrality, the open support given to Christian missions by sympathetic colonial officials looked very much like part of a concerted effort to undermine India's religious and cultural heritage. Pfander expressed early confidence in "the efficacy of a technologically superior and socially progressive Europe in ensuring the eventual success of the Gospel"²⁹ and was confident that God would not allow India to revert to Muslim rule.³⁰

Rahmat Ali, whose *Izhar al-haqq* achieved great popularity throughout the Muslim world, appears to have been invited to Istanbul by the caliph to instruct the ulema in anti-Christian polemic. Some think that Pfander and he may actually have met again in debate, but this is unconfirmed. In fact, Pfander's activities in Turkey were curtailed by the caliph, who in 1864 banned the *Mizan*, closed down the "preaching hall in the bazaar, and imprisoned those Muslims who . . . had converted to Christianity."³¹ Perhaps, tactically, what had worked reasonably well in British India, under sympathetic government officials such as Sir William Muir and, in his Peshawar days, Sir Herbert Edwardes (1819–68), was less successful when removed from such protection.³² The CMS mission relocated to Egypt, Pfander went to England (previously visited on leave in 1853) with his wife, who was ill, unexpectedly fell ill himself, and died very suddenly in early 1866. Powell surmises that Pfander left Turkey disillusioned "with the prospect of converting Muslims to Christianity."³³ Had not death intervened, however, he would likely have continued his lifelong labor elsewhere. In its obituary, the CMS suggested that since, "so long as there is a Christian Mission to Mohammedan countries, Pfander's works will endure," they

should be translated "into English, as textbooks for Missionaries and Mission schools in all parts of Asia."³⁴

Appraisal

Pfander's approach perpetuated. The first English version of the *Mizan* appeared in 1867; translations in other languages also continued to appear. Early this century, William St. Clair-Tisdall (1859–1928) revised, and translated into English, all three of Pfander's books. Tisdall largely continued Pfander's view, both of Islam as salvifically bankrupt and of Muhammad as morally culpable. A better scholar than Pfander, Tisdall's own writing contributed to the development of serious Christian thinking about the relationship between Christ and other faiths. Others, including Imad-ud-Din and W. A. Rice, whose *Crusaders of the Twentieth Century* appeared in 1910, continued Pfander's approach, virtually without modification. William Muir, inspired by Pfander, surpassed him as a scholar but perpetuated his estimate of Islam. The fact, though, that Pfander's books remain in print today suggests that some Christians still value his approach. "We do not hesitate," says the preface to the 1986 edition of the *Mizan*, "to print such a book of fundamental importance. . . . Islam is still the same, and needs a definitive answer."

Pfander's approach modified. Bishop French acknowledged Pfander as his "Master in missions," as a "worthy successor of . . . Henry Martyn," but modified his style, pioneering an approach to Muslims that avoided open disputation. He thought that rational argument could never do justice to the mystery that lies at the heart of Christian faith and aimed not so much to defeat Islam as to win Muslim hearts.³⁵ Safdar Ali, in his *Niaz nama* (Friendly treatise), used "the persuasive tone born of love and a strong desire to bring [Muslims] to a knowledge of the saviour of men." His writing lacked the "acrid and stinging element of some . . . on the subject."³⁶

Pfander's approach rejected. Lewis Bevan Jones (1880–1960) openly criticized, and rejected, Pfander's books as "chiefly . . . a

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guide to something better."³⁷ Unable to reject Islam totally, Jones tried to build on what he perceived as its strengths. He aimed to explain Christianity rather than to refute Islam. The bitterly anti-Christian literature that Pfander's books provoked still colors some Muslim polemic today, for example, the work of Ahmed Deedat, who has acknowledged Rahmat Ali's influence. However, as Vander Werff says, "Regardless of one's evaluation of Pfander's controversial approach, his intellectual abilities, literary skills and Christian dedication remain."³⁸ Subsequently, initial training in Arabic and in Islamics, followed by lifelong immersion in Muslim culture, together with mastery of languages, have been recognized as essential qualifications for any Christian work among Muslims. Whether we regret or rejoice in Pfander's legacy, he occupies an "honourable place in the history of missions to Muslims."³⁹

Notes

1. J. T. Addison, *The Christian Approach to the Moslem* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1942), p. 213.
2. Imad-ud-Din, "The Results of the Controversy in North India with Mohammedans," *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (hereafter CMI) 10 (1875): 276.
3. Lyle L. Vander Werff, *Christian Mission to Muslims* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Press, 1977), p. 43.
4. See A. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (London: Curzon Press, 1992), pp. 133–36.
5. Pfander to Basel Mission, September 1, 1831, cited in "The Late Rev. Dr. Charles Gottlieb Pfander, D.D.," CMI, n.s., 2 (April 1866): 98.
6. See W. Muir, *The Mohammedan Controversy* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), p. 32. In fact, two Muslims did help revise the final script; see S. W. Zwemer, "Karl Gottlieb Pfander," *Moslem World* 31 (July 1941): 216–26.
7. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, p. 146.
8. W. A. Rice, *Crusaders of the Twentieth Century; or, The Christian Missionary and the Muslim* (London: CMS, 1910).
9. See E. Headland, *Revd. Karl Gottlieb Pfander, D.D., Sketches of CMS Workers* (London: CMS, 1897), pp. 7–8 (hereafter KGP). On p. 112 of my *Victorian Images of Islam* (London: Grey Seal, 1992), I mistakenly blamed Pfander for the expulsion, and also wrongly gave 1835 as the date of his joining the CMS, following Lewis Bevan Jones, *The People of the Mosque* (Calcutta: YMCA, 1939), for both.
10. KGP, pp. 9–10.
11. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin, 1964), p. 366.
12. Paul Eppler, *Geschichte der Basler Mission, 1815–1899* (Basel: Basel Mission, 1900), p. 17.
13. Muir, *Mohammedan Controversy*, p. 67.
14. K. G. Pfander, trans. R. H. Weakley, *Balance of Truth* (London: CMS, 1867), p. 121; see also Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, p. 151.
15. Pfander, *Balance of Truth*, p. 123.
16. K. G. Pfander, *Remarks on the Nature of Muhammedanism* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1840), pp. 3–5.
17. Vander Werff, *Christian Mission to Muslims*, p. 41; see Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, pp. 140–44.
18. Jones, *People of the Mosque*, p. 248.
19. Muir, *Mohammedan Controversy*, p. 25.
20. See A. Powell, "Maulana Rahmat Allah Kairanawi and Muslim-Christian Controversy in India in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1976, p. 54, citing Pfander in CMI 5 (1854): 254.
21. Powell, "Maulana Rahmat Allah Kairanawi," p. 55.
22. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, pp. 235–36.
23. E. M. Wherry, *The Muslim Controversy* (London: CLS, 1905), p. 2.
24. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, p. 259.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
26. KGP, pp. 15–16.
27. CMI, April 1866, p. 101, citing Sir Herbert Edwardes, who remembered with affection the "burly Saxon figure . . . beaming with intellect, simplicity and benevolence."
28. The memo, which cites the support of European scholars, dismisses Oriental learning as worthless.
29. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, p. 155.
30. KGP, p. 14.
31. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, p. 293.
32. Cited in KGP, p. 16.
33. Powell, "Maulana Rahmat Allah Kairanawi," p. 62.
34. CMI, April 1866, p. 102.
35. H. Birks, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Valpy French* (London: John Murray, 1895), pp. 323, 216.
36. Wherry, *Muslim Controversy*, p. 97.
37. Jones, *People of the Mosque*, p. 248.
38. Vander Werff, *Christian Mission to Muslims*, p. 93.
39. Addison, *Christian Approach to the Moslem*, p. 213.

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Personal papers of Pfander are located at the Basel Mission Archives, Basel, Switzerland, and at the Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, England.