



Abdullah Quilliam Society

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The respected and well known scholar Sheikh Abdullah Bey Quilliam was one of the first English men to convert to Islam in the 19th century: 42 years ago he started his work of *dawah* to Islam among his own people, inviting them to become Muslims. He visited the Alfath newspapers offices in Cairo in August 1928.

He was born in 1856, and accepted Islam in 1887. In 1889 he wrote his well-known book – *The Faith of Islam* – which is concerned with *dawah* to Islam and explaining its key principles. In it he gives testimonies of European scholars and well known authors about the benefits of Islam for civilisation and intellectual development – and provides insight into the founding of Islam, the core principles of the *deen*, and the logic and reasoning of its main principles and beliefs.

He also authored his paper – *The Sufficient Answers* – in which he replied to his critics, of whom some were his family and friends who objected to him becoming a Muslim.

This brother in Islam will give a talk to be delivered in the English language at the Muslim Youth Association Centre this coming Saturday after Maghrib prayers. The title of the lecture is “*Half a Century of Islam in England*”.

We welcome our respected brother who is visiting the Egyptian capital for a few days and who will be leaving within the next few days, may Allah bless him during his stay and in his departure.

Cairo, Thursday 23 Safar 1347 Hijri 9th August 1928

Article

“Half a Century of Islam in England”

An Early English Muslim Man Speaks

**A Lecture by Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam
held at the Muslim Youth Association Centre, Cairo**

Introduction:

Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam is now in his late seventies, approaching eighty years of age – but he is still a strong man, full of energy and enthusiasm. His doctors advised him to take a long holiday on board ship, so that he could breathe plenty of fresh air to improve his health. The Sheikh travelled with his wife, Maryam. By the time their ship reached the Suez Canal, Sheikh Abdullah was already tired of looking at the

sea and wanted to spend a few days in the Nile Valley, while the ship continued its journey to India. He plans to board it again at Port Sa'id, on its return journey.

Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam's well-known picture portrays him wearing a turban and a light beard – and it appears on the front cover of his book, *The Faith of Islam*. This picture was taken when he was working at the Islamic University of which Sultan Abdul Hamid II was Patron. He was trusted and always fulfilled his tasks and duties.

When Sheikh Abdullah disembarked in Egypt, he was wearing a patterned *tarbush*, while his wife was wearing a full veil, fully covered, in a thick, large, layered wrap. They were well received, with special attention, especially as regards his elderly wife, who was advised to lighten her layers of clothing and to wear her usual well covering modest clothing – which also reflects her religious identity and dignity.

Today and in the world of art and authorship, Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam is known as H.M. Leon, which stands for Haroon Mustapha Leon. He was compelled to adopt the name Leon because his wife's uncle was a business and property owner, who had no son to inherit from him – and so he made a condition that his wealth would not be transferred to his niece on his death unless her husband agreed beforehand to adopt his surname. Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam accordingly accepted the new name, registered it officially, and now uses Leon as his own surname. He is currently an active participant in a public journal and holds respected and well-known professional titles. During his studies, he was awarded a PhD in both Law and Art, as well as qualifications in other subjects.

Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam has a number of children and grandchildren – and they are all Muslims.

This introduction to Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam was delivered by our friend Mr. Rashid Bey Rassam to an audience at the Muslim Youth Association. It inspired the large audience to stand up and applaud continuously as soon as Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam took the stage to give his lecture entitled "Half a Century of Islam in England".

The meeting hall was full of members of the Association, many of whom were young, English language speakers. The atmosphere was vibrant and dynamic. Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam was so uplifted by the enthusiasm shown during his talk that his wife became concerned about the effects that the 2 hour long lecture – which was amplified by the rapport that he developed with his audience – would have on his health.

When the talk finished, Mr. Mahmoud Bey Ali Fadli, a committee member of the Association, summarised the speech to the audience in Arabic, so that the non-English speakers did not miss out on the meaning of this outstanding talk.

A summary of the talk (translated from the Arabic):

The Lecture

Bismillah'ir-Rahma'ir-Rahim

In the Name of Allah the most Beneficent the most Merciful

As-Salamu alaikum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakatuhu

“Dear Brothers, I apologise for not being a competent Arabic language speaker, when my talk tonight is being given to an Arabic audience. This situation reminds me of a speech that I gave in Lagos, when His Majesty Sultan Abdul Hamid II delegated me to attend the presentation of the Sultan Badge of Honour to Mohammed Bey Sheeni in recognition for his overseeing the building of a mosque there, which cost £5,000. The people attending the event came from six mixed backgrounds and nationalities, so we needed six interpreters to translate my speech to the audience. From among the audience, 16 people converted to Islam immediately after the end of the speech.

Today we do not have any Christians present in this gathering. I wish that there were some Christians with us today, so that they could hear about the merits of Islam and learn of its real value and benefits – so that they could become friends of Islam.

Dear Brothers, I am pleased to be with you tonight and to talk to you. I have chosen to speak to you about myself – about my role and the responsibility I decided to take on to present Islam after I became a Muslim. I apologise to you if my choice to talk about myself appears to be selfish and self-centred.

60 years ago, my doctor advised me to take a rest for the sake of my health and to spend some time in Gibraltar. After I had arrived in Gibraltar, I boarded a ship to Tangier to see the lands of Morocco. While I was on the ferry, I saw some Moroccan Hajjis scooping up water from the sea and using it carefully and scrupulously to wash themselves. The ship set sail and as soon as it left the port, these Hajjis stood neatly together in a line and started to do the prayer, in full submission and tranquillity – they were not at all troubled by the force of the strong wind, or by the swaying of the ship. I was deeply touched by the look on their faces and their expressions, which displayed complete trust and sincerity. I was intrigued and became very interested to acquire knowledge and learn about their religion and those who believe in it.

In Tangier, I met a Muslim man who spoke English and we remained companions, especially when he saw that I wanted to learn about the principles of Islam and the ties that bring Muslims together.

One evening, as we sat together in a café in Tangier, we met a Jewish man whom my friend knew. My friend said, “I will give you an illustration which demonstrates the truth of the three main religions in the world – the religions which the three of us represent. The Prophets are the messengers of Allah, sent to mankind to convey to people principles, rules and practices – and to guide them on the path of happiness. This is why Adam, Noah, Ibrahim and all the prophets who came after Ibrahim were sent.

Before people split into Jews and Christians and Muslims, they were all one group. Then Jesus came with a fresh guidance and insights to benefit his followers. He and his followers then separated from Judaism. They were right to do so, because Christianity came after the previous revelation and presented a corrected and better path.

Then after that, came Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, believing in all the previous Prophets and guiding people to “the Straight Path”, the *Sirat’al-Mustaqeem* – a Straight Path for those who sought it, to benefit them with guidance and direction. The Muslims then separated from the other religions – and they were right to do so, in the same way as the Christians had done in the past.

Just as Christianity is better than Judaism because its “Divine Inspiration”, *Wahi*, came more recently, so too Islam is better than both Christianity and Judaism because Islam’s “Divine Inspiration”, *Wahi*, is more recent – and it is the last and everlasting religion.”

I listened to my friend talk and thought deeply about what he was saying. It was reasonable and logical and personally, I felt it did not contradict my beliefs. After this, I became determined to read books about Islam and to see what prominent authors and scholars had written about Islam. I read a translation of the *Noble Quran* and the *Book of Heroes*, written by Carlyle – as well as many other books. By the time I left Tangier, I had submitted to Islam and surrendered to Allah – and I testified that it is the true *deen*.

When I returned to England, I became preoccupied with thinking about what *Dawah* methods would be appropriate to use when inviting people to accept Islam and to convince them of the truth of the *deen*. I was aware that the English people were already filled with a hostility towards Islam which had been fed to them by European anti-Islam ideologists. This was a strong barrier in my way, which prevented me from openly exchanging my ideas and views with English people. If you talk to English people about Islam, they think you are talking to them about some heathen religion.

Using the press was even more difficult: newspapers never accept or allow our *Dawah* to Islam activities to be covered. I then thought of a different approach to spread the *Dawah* to Islam, by joining the “Association for the Prohibition of Alcohol” who used to give regular lectures. For example, in one of this Association’s gatherings I gave a lecture about “Fanaticism and Fanatics”. I started the talk by mentioning the names of well-known specialists in the spheres of invention and social reform – like Stephenson, the inventor of the steam power and Wilberforce, the campaigner against slavery. I explained how each of these leading figures had resisted persecution and ridicule and had dedicated their talents towards their goals. I said that we can see that in spite all of that opposition, the effects of their achievements and reform that have gained global recognition – they have spread and have benefited humanity a great deal.

I continued in my talk by mentioning the Prophet Mohammed, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, saying: “This master reformer came with a clear message inviting people to what is good and beneficial. In spite of this, he had to face harm and persecution, just like any other great reformers who have been dedicated to the welfare of people. Later on, when people realised the value of his message and believed him, they entered Islam in large groups and continued to do so until their numbers reached hundreds of millions, right across the world.

I then talked about some of the moral principles and teachings of Islam which the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, invited people to adopt. Some of the journalists who attended the lecture found this very amusing and asked me if they could publish a **summary** of my talk in their newspapers. I said, “No,” and made it a condition that they could only publish my words if they printed the whole talk and not just a summary of it. I only gave my permission for the whole talk to be published. They accepted this and recorded the full lecture for the purposes of publication. Soon after, however, some priests heard about the proposed publication of the lecture and they told the newspaper editors not to publish this lecture, saying that it was a conspiracy to invite people to a heathen religion by encouraging Christians to leave their religion. So the newspaper editors broke their agreement

with me and published a summary rather than the whole lecture – in which they removed all my references to Prophet Mohammed, may Allah bless him and grant him peace.

Relying on my agreement with the newspaper editors that I had only given them permission to publish the whole lecture and not just a summary, I sent them a warning that I would take legal action against the press, and take them to court for breaching the agreement and misrepresenting the contents of my lecture. I urged them to honour their agreement and to publish the full lecture.

The success of my lecture and the publicity surrounding it generated a wider and greater interest than expected. As a result of the publicity which the lecture had engendered, I decided to establish a centre in my hometown of Liverpool – a place where we could pray, and celebrate our religious feasts, and also give lectures. Indeed, we chose and set up a centre, half of which is used for worship and the other half of which is used for teaching, guidance and delivering speeches.

Soon after we had opened this Islamic Centre, we faced hostility from some priests, who started sending thugs and misguided people who demonstrated to us how they had been misinformed and brain-washed and led to believe that we were bad people. Their misconceptions were revealed when these thugs and misguided people visited us and found out for themselves that what they had been told about us was not true. These realisations of truth then had a positive impact on these people.

Some of the persecution which we faced from these groups included their throwing rubbish and dirt on people while they were doing the prayer, or as they were leaving the Centre; throwing stones at the Imam; and putting sharp pieces of broken glass on the prayer mats and floor, so that people were cut on their foreheads, hands and feet.

One evening, while we were all in the Mosque, they took the opportunity to string razor wire across the doorstep, so that people would fall over it in the dark and suffer injury. It just so happened that on that day I had a cane which had been given to me by a friend as a present. Luckily, as we walked out that evening, I was holding the cane – something I do not usually do. As we were leaving the mosque, I was walking ahead of the others with the cane held in front of me. Suddenly, I felt the cane hit something and it became stuck. I soon discovered the razor wire which had been placed across the doorstep to hurt us – but Allah saved us from any harm and from the harmful people who put it there.

One day, my Muslim brothers and I entered the Mosque. I was due to give a talk about the interpretation of the Noble Quran. I saw that a group of people had already arrived before us. Their faces were unfamiliar and looked suspicious. I paid them no attention and having recited some verses of the Noble Quran, I started explaining and interpreting the meaning of the verses and showing the wisdom and lessons within them. When I had finished, one of the members of this suspicious group took some stones out of his pockets and threw them on the floor. He turned to the rest of his group and said, “Now I can become a Muslim – whoever of you wants to throw stones at Muslims can throw their stones at me now.” They all then threw away whatever stones they had in their pockets, accepted Islam and became Muslims.

This man, who had been the leader of the group, later become my firmest supporter and my right-hand assistant. He chose Jamaludin Ali as his new name. From then on, he accompanied me on every Dawat’al-Islam trip that I took.

Once we went to Birkenhead as it had been agreed that I would give a talk to the "Association of Prohibition of Alcohol" based in Birkenhead. In this talk, I spoke about Islam and the Prophet Mohammed, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. The lady who was the secretary of the Association displayed an interest in my talk and said that although she had a bad opinion of Islam, she wanted me to provide her with some more information about Islam.

"Isn't it true," she asked, "that the Muslim Prophet said that women do not have souls and will not go to Paradise?"

I told her that this is not true and that this is a lie which the enemies of Islam spread. I gave her accurate information about the Islamic religion and its principles and its foundations. This lady then accepted Islam and became a Muslim and named herself Fatima – and also helped her sister and brother in law to become Muslims.

One day I gave a talk in Liverpool. When I had finished, a man came up to me and asked to walk along with me on my way home because he wanted to talk to me. We walked along together and started talking about Islam. He asked questions and I provided him with answers, in a gentle way. When we reached my house, I invited him in for tea. He stayed until midnight – and still we were talking about Islam and its honourable status and its valid scientific principles, which are applicable for all time and in all places.

At the end of our talk he said, "If everything that you have said about Islam is true, what is stopping you from becoming a Muslim?" I replied, "I am proud to inform you that I am a Muslim. This man then accepted Islam and took Jamaludin Bukhari as his new name.

Many people think that Lord Headley is the first English Lord to convert to Islam. This is not true, because Lord Stanley of Alderley became a Muslim before him – and he always preferred to be called Abdul Rahman Effendi. He used to come to our mosque and pray with his brothers, in spite of the distinct difference in social class between them.

The number of English people who converted to Islam increased to several hundred.

While we are talking about the Mosque and the people who do the prayer, I would like to say that we follow the practice of the Islamic Sunnah: the women pray in a separate row behind the men. As regards Woking Mosque, for a time their way of doing the prayer was that a man would pray standing between two women and a woman would pray standing between two men. This was in response to some anti-Islam proganda which claims that Islam humiliates women by lowering their status and obliging them to pray behind men – which is not true.

The undeniable fact, of which I have no doubt, is that the Islamic Sunnah permits men and women to do congregational prayers in the same area, but in separate rows. Islam respects women, honours them, and acknowledges their rights – which, in general terms, are reasonable, given the natural and biological differences between the two sexes."

Conclusion:

Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam concluded by stating his opposition to the spread of alcohol in the Muslim countries and the increase in advertising it in stations, main streets and everywhere. He advised young Muslims to resist this evil, and to forbid it, and to

work to remove it, and to obey what they have been commanded in the *deen* – and to ignore what the enemies of Islam say.

This is a summary of the lecture given by Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam. It had a great impact and made love for him grow in the hearts of all his listeners – which was the best gift and greatest reward which he could receive for all his hard work in struggling to exalt the words of Allah and His *deen*, Islam .

Translated from the Arabic and presented for the first time by the Abdullah Quilliam Society. This was read out at the First Annual Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam Memorial Lecture, held in Liverpool, on the 22nd April 2012

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Notes

1. Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam (born William Henry), according to his own writings claims to be the first native Englishman known to convert to Islam in 1887. He went on to establish the first functioning Mosque and Islamic Centre in England, in Liverpool, opening on Christmas Day, 1889.
2. He was appointed Sheikh ul Islam of the British Isles by the last Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II. This title formally recognised him as the religious and political leader of the Muslims in Britain, with legal authority to perform contractual duties and issue fatwas. He is the only Muslim in the UK to have held this title, and the Office remains vacant.
3. The premises situated at 8-12 Brougham Terrace, Liverpool are not only important for British Muslim heritage as a Mosque, but also as the Office of the Sheikh ul Islam of the British Isles.
4. Through his institutions and publications (The weekly Crescent and Islamic World) Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam was responsible for the conversion of around 600 native English people to Islam. His book "*Faith of Islam*" ran into three editions and thirteen languages, and was key to helping many English people understand Islam in spite of the negative portrayals at the time. Queen Victoria ordered a copy for herself and then re-ordered six more copies for her children.
5. Facing vilification, Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam left for Turkey and returned under the name Haroon Mustapha Leon. He died on the 23rd April 1932. It has often been assumed that he changed his name to hide his true identity – although the **Introduction** above states that it was so that his wife could inherit from her uncle.
6. This unique speech has been released in English by the Quilliam society for the first time. The 1928 speech and introduction to Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam by the Muslim Association of Cairo – details of which must have been provided by Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam – provides the real reason for his change in name.
7. This period of his life, he spent in Turkey, as the Ottoman Caliphate was collapsing and presumably serving Sultan Abdul Hamid needs more research.
8. The speech also clarifies that he embraced Islam after the incident he describes in Morocco not sometime after his return as widely written.

9. The speech also clarifies that the first Muslim in the House of Lords, was Lord Stanley (3rd Baron Stanley of Alderley Park) – and not Lord Headley (5th Baron Headley), as commonly assumed. Sir Abdullah Archibald Hamilton (5th Baronet), and Lady Evelyn Zainab Cobbold were also contemporary converts.

The Crescent gave the following account of Lord Stanley's funeral;

"On Tuesday, the 25th Ramadan (15th December) his mortal remains were laid silently to rest in a secluded plantation in Alderley Park, his late lordship's ancestral home. The internment took place at an early hour, and was conducted strictly according to Muslim usage, in which Holy and Imperishable Faith his lordship lived and died (Alhamd-u-lillah!). The corpse was enclosed in a plain deal coffin, and borne from the hall by workmen on the Alderley estate. Following it on foot were the successor to the title (the Hon'ble Lyulph Stanley), his wife, their two sons, and other relatives. By the late Lord Stanley's special direction there was also present as chief mourner his Excellency Hamid Bey, Premier Secretaire to the Ottoman Embassy in London. The Islamic prayers were recited over the grave by the Imam to the Turkish Embassy. A Janaza service in memory of the deceased was held at the Liverpool Mosque, and was conducted by His Honour Abdullah Quilliam Effendi, Sheikh-ul Islam of the British Isles."

10. Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam's speech highlights the issues and challenges that the first community of British Muslims faced, many of which are not that different from the challenges faced today by British Muslims.
11. In 2010, the book, *Islam in Victorian Britain: The Life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam* by Ron Geaves was published. It provides much insight into the unique life of this early British Muslim. There is however much more to uncover about this pioneer Muslim and his followers.