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A Personal Report on the 2015 Jalsa Salana Convention

By Barrie Schwortz

I have to admit that I knew very little (if anything) about Islam when I first received the invitation from my friend Arif Khan to attend and speak at the Jalsa Salana Convention. That, in part, was what caused me to have some reservations about attending. I discussed this with Pam Moon via Skype and we both agreed that we needed more information about the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. I mentioned this to Arif, a staff writer for *The Review of Religions* magazine, who I had worked with since 2002, and he quickly sent me a series of links to provide us with some important background information about their community, which we published online in our August 16, 2015 update. These were essential for Pam and me to gain a better understanding of who the Ahmadiyya community was and what we were going to participate in and are definitely worth repeating, so I am including them again:

We start with a link to their [Love For All, Hatred For None](#) website, which not only is the Ahmadiyya community's motto, but also clearly reflects their underlying philosophy and point of view. Next is a link to the BBC coverage of their [2013 Convention](#) along with some photographs from the [2014 Jalsa Convention](#). You can also watch a short video documentary (11:42) that expresses the [Ahmadiyya view on the Shroud of Turin](#) and a longer, more in depth one hour program titled, [Islam Ahmadiyyat - Revival of Faith](#), that I found very informative.

Sadly, at least here in the U.S.A., we rarely get any good news about the Muslim faith. Mostly, we hear about the Sunni and Shi'ite sects that have been violently battling each other for many centuries, or the radical extremists and their medieval tactics that are reported daily in the headlines. In fact, most people in America have never even *heard* of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community! Since their motto is "Love for all, hatred for none," and they truly practice this in every facet of their lives, they rarely make the news. (Apparently, peace isn't very newsworthy)!

In my research, I learned that there are 73 sects in the Muslim faith and the Ahmadiyya Muslims are number 73 and the fastest growing sect in Islam (with more than 150 million followers in 200 countries). With a philosophy of “Love for all, hatred for none,” I am not surprised that they are attracting new members to their community in large numbers. However, since they interpret some of the mainstream Muslim philosophies differently, they have been labeled heretics, ostracized and marginalized by the mainstream Muslim world. Openly practicing their faith was literally declared “illegal” in Pakistan. In fact, if they label their mosques as mosques in that country, the military is called in and destroys it. At the Jalsa, there was an exhibit in one tent with a “Wall of Martyrs” that included the photographs of countless Ahmadiyya Muslims who have been murdered, simply because they openly practiced their faith.

Of course, this article should not be mistaken for any type of political commentary. I simply wish to convey the true picture of who our hosts were, and why attending the Jalsa was a truly wonderful and enlightening experience for everyone.



Barrie Schwortz and Arif Khan at the Shroud Exhibition in the Review of Religions marquee - ©2015 Simon Brown

I arrived in London on Wednesday, August 19th and was picked up at Heathrow airport by my “old” friend Arif Khan, who I have been corresponding with since 2002 (when he was only 20 years old), but we had never met in person. He had first contacted me to obtain permission for his 14 year old brother to use a Shroud photograph in an article he was writing for a school assignment. Since then, Arif has become something of a “Shroudie” himself, and as a staff writer for *The Review of Religions* publication, we have been in contact on several occasions, whenever *The Review* wanted to reprint one of my Shroud articles in their magazine. The most recent contact was earlier this year and marked the third time since 2002 that the editors wanted to include several of my articles, this time in their May 2015 issue, which also included a large selection of my 1978

photographs. It turned out that the issue, which was predominately about the Shroud, was received very favorably by its readers and ultimately led to my invitation to the Jalsa.



After greeting each other like old friends, Arif brought me to his home, where I could finally meet his beautiful wife and two precious daughters in person. We had all met via Skype back in June when Arif and I were making plans for the Jalsa event, so it was great fun to get hugs from them upon arrival! Knowing that I had two grandsons of my own whose birthdays were both in August, they kindly agreed to take me shopping so I could get them some gifts that said "London." We spent the rest of the day together, had meals together, shared my first ride on the historic London Underground together (see photo at left) and every moment felt like I was a true member of their family. I could see they were living their motto, "Love for all..."

The next morning (Thursday) we drove out of London to the Jalsa site on a large dairy farm in Hampshire, where we met other members of the *Review of Religions* team, including Amer Safir, the Chief Editor of the publication and Shahzad Ahmed, the Exhibition Manager. Amer had also corresponded with me over the years and it was great to finally meet him in person as well. As I entered the Review tent, I was thrilled to see our dear friend Pam Moon, who had just finished overseeing the setup of her Shroud of Turin Exhibition display, including the lifesize replica of the Shroud and lifesize ventral and dorsal negative images. I hadn't seen Pam since we both attended the St. Louis Conference in 2014.

The Jalsa site was enormous and huge tents (marquees) were set up everywhere. One tent, the main one of the event, dwarfed all the rest and seated at least 10,000 people! One of the most amazing things about the Jalsa is that all meals at the convention were included and provided by the Ahmadiyya community. That is 35,000 people per day over three full days that need to be fed, and that equals a lot of meals! And the food was superb, prepared and delivered to the countless tables by an army of volunteers, some no more than 10 years old. It was truly a community event.

I gave my first Keynote presentation in the *Review of Religions* marquee the next day. Arif had been cautious and warned me that since this was the first time they had ever sponsored a large marquee with exhibits and lectures, there was no predicting how many (or how few) people might attend. Yet folks started pouring into the tent well before my scheduled presentation and by the

time I was to begin, the tent was packed with people, all the seats were taken and hundreds of others were standing behind the chairs and even filling up the area of the Quran exhibit. As I looked at the large crowd before me, I turned to Arif and, borrowing a line from *Jaws* said, “You are going to need a bigger tent!”

I am very grateful to Mr. Simon Brown, who spent most of his time in the Review tent shooting video of everything that took place. He has since posted the videos to YouTube and we are happy to include some of the links he provided:

[Barrie Schwortz on the Shroud of Turin Part 1 – Day One Presentation](#) - 1:01:59

[Barrie Schwortz on the Shroud of Turin Part 2 – Day One Q&A](#) – 36:28



Hadhrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, Spiritual Leader of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community ©2015 Simon Brown

At the end of the first day, as we were leaving the Review tent to return to our hotel, we were asked to quickly go back inside, as the Spiritual Leader of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Hadhrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, was arriving to view the exhibitions of the Quran and Shroud! When he came to the lifesize Shroud replica, Pam and I were standing by to discuss it with him and answer his questions. During the public exhibition in 2010, he visited Turin and was given a personal viewing of the Shroud by Mons. Giuseppe Ghiberti, then President of the Turin Diocesan Commission on the Shroud. His Holiness was very generous with his time and we were deeply honored by his visit, but were even happier to hear that in his closing remarks he had recommended that everyone attending the convention should visit the Review tent and see the exhibitions. Again, I am grateful that Simon was there with his camera. Here is a video of our brief meeting:

[Barrie Schwortz and Pam Moon meet World Muslim Leader Hadhrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad](#) - :57

The *Review of Religions* video crew was also on hand, and they interviewed all of the Shroud scholars in attendance, including Pam, David Rolfe, Hugh Farey and myself along with Mr. Razwan Baig, the collector who provided the materials in the ancient Quran exhibit. They ultimately produced a great video of the event that included many of the interviews:

[Interviews and Highlights - Turin Shroud and Ancient Quran – 5:57](#)

Speaking of interviews, I also participated in another one with Mr. Paul Deach, a media consultant and local government official from Surrey who attended the event and recorded our conversation for his podcast. Paul also happens to be Jewish, so our conversation was quite interesting. He graciously posted the podcast on the [STERA, Inc. Facebook](#) page before I even returned from England and you can listen to it directly at this link on the Surrey Residents Network:

[Paul Deach Podcast with Barrie Schwortz – 6:38](#)

The second day of the convention was even more successful, with the Review tent overflowing throughout the day. The security guards told us that the night before, people kept coming to see the Shroud replica after the exhibit was closed, so they reopened it and kept ushering in visitors until nearly 1:00 am! That afternoon I gave my second Keynote presentation to another standing room only crowd and this time, the Review video crew captured my entire lecture. Here is the link:

[Barrie Schwortz Day Two Presentation – 38:22](#)



Arif Khan and Barrie Schwortz on live television to 50 million viewers in Africa - ©2015 Review of Religions

The next morning, Sunday, was the last day of the event and Arif Khan and I were invited to appear on a live television program being broadcast directly by satellite from the Jalsa event to 50 million viewers in Africa by MTA Africa, a division of the Ahmadiyya community's own television

network. Ironically, ours was the first interview ever conducted by the young host of the program, who was amazingly enthusiastic, thoroughly prepared and did a truly great job. I think he found his calling. I was also informed that morning that the Spiritual Leader had invited me to make a brief comment to the entire convention in the main tent later that afternoon.



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I have done a lot of lecturing over the years and have spoken to some pretty large audiences, but I never spoke to 10,000 people in the same room with me before! This portion of the program was designed to give visiting dignitaries and politicians the opportunity to address the entire group. As I sat on the stage waiting for my name to be announced, I realized that every other speaker that went before me had a written, prepared speech in hand and very few spoke extemporaneously. I had prepared nothing, which made me a little nervous, but I had no time to dwell on it because I was given the signal that I was the next one up. After a gracious introduction, I walked to the podium and looked out on the huge sea of faces before me. Then I noticed the yellow banner on the back wall of the giant tent that stated in bold letters, “Love for all, hatred for none.” So I simply stood there and spoke from the heart and was deeply moved by the wonderful response I received.

I am particularly grateful to the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community and their professional television network, MTA International, who were live broadcasting (and recording) the entire event and sending it around the world to 200 countries. They kindly sent me the following link to my entire 3 ½ minute presentation:

["YOU are the good news!" Turin Shroud expert addresses 35,000 at Muslim Convention – 3:35](#)

When I came off that stage and as I exited the tent, I probably shook a thousand hands of people who had watched my little speech and came up to congratulate me! Mine was the last speech of the day and afterwards, the event was brought to a close by the Spiritual Leader. Three solid days had passed with 35,000 attendees, and not even one negative incident of any kind was reported. I am forever grateful to all my friends at the *Review of Religions* and in the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in general for the love, respect and consideration they showed all of us. They truly live their creed and made all of us feel not only welcome, but a truly loved and respected part of their community. And the best news of all is that I have been invited back for next year’s 50th Jalsa Salana Convention and I definitely plan to be there. It was wonderful to embrace our many similarities, rather than focusing on our differences. If the Shroud of Turin can open a dialogue with this important segment of the Muslim community, we should take every opportunity to do so,

and I'll be at the front of that line! When a Muslim organization invites a Jewish man to discuss a Christian relic, they are certainly living up to their motto, "Love for all, hatred for none!"



(L to R) David Rolfe, Arif Khan, Barrie Schwortz (and opposite) Amer Safir, Hugh Farey and Simon Brown enjoying a meal together at the event. That is Pam Moon standing in the background wearing the red blazer.

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Here are some additional links you might find interesting:

[Turin Shroud replica displayed at Ahmadiyya Muslim convention in Hampshire](#): Catholic Herald

[Thousands attend Muslim conference pledging to defy extremism](#): ITV News

[A Figure Shrouded In Controversy – Will The Mystery Ever Be Solved?](#): On Religion magazine website

Barrie Schwortz
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