



Shaykh ‘Abdul Karīm al-Rifā‘ī ﷺ

By Shaykh Shoayb Ahmad

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Birth & Early Years

Shaykh ‘Abdul Karīm al-Rifā‘ī was born in 1322/1901, during the last days of the Ottoman Caliphate, a period of ignorance of the teachings of Islam as well as widespread poverty. He too was born into a poor family and during his childhood Shaykh ‘Abdul Kareem was sick and physically weak. His mother tried her best to have him cured despite her own difficult circumstances in having to support her family after her husband’s death. She heard about a famous and pious scholar of Damascus, Shaykh ‘Alī al-Daqr who would gladly assist people. She went to him and presented her son before him and entrusted him with her son hoping that through his blessings and the blessings of religious knowledge (*‘ilm*) he would be cured. As soon as Shaykh ‘Alī looked at the boy it was as if Allāh had already shown him the bright future that awaited the young boy. The Shaykh took special care of the boy and continued to supplicate to Allāh for him. After a short while signs of improvement were apparent and the boy began walking by himself – having previously needing to be carried. In this way the mother’s wishes and aspirations for her son were soon realized.

His Education

Shaykh ‘Abdul Karīm devoted himself to acquiring *‘ilm* at the hands of his teacher, Shaykh ‘Alī al-Daqr until he himself became a teacher at one of the study circles (*halaqāt*). When Shaykh ‘Alī saw his dedication he permitted him to attend the lessons of the great *Muḥaddith*, Shaykh Badruddīn al-Ḥasanī. Shaykh Badruddīn immediately perceived some good in Shaykh ‘Abdul Karīm and allocated special time to him during which he taught him *tawḥīd*, logic and philosophy. This lasted for about seventeen years. During this period he was not accompanied by anyone else while attending these special lessons with Shaykh Badruddīn.

Shaykh ‘Abdul Karīm also studied under Shaykh Amīn Suwayd who was specialist in Fiqh and Ḥadīth and under Shaykh Maḥmūd al-Attār who was a renowned scholar of Syria. These scholars were responsible for developing Shaykh ‘Abdul Karīm’s personality as well as his spiritual and academic development resulting in his becoming an outstanding scholar.

Teaching

Shaykh ‘Abdul Karīm served as a teacher in numerous institutions (*maḥads*) during which he instilled within the students sincerity and the responsibility of *‘ilm* and propagation (*da‘wah*). It was the will of Allāh that he served as a teacher, *Khatīb* and Imām at *Jāmi‘ Zayd ibn Thābit*. It was here that his exceptional work began when he revived the role of the mosque until it resembled the glorious days of the illustrious scholars of the past.

He held study circles in the mosque in the different subjects. His aim however was to produce youth who have a good sound understanding of Islam and their role as Muslims together with their specialization in other disciplines like medicine and engineering. He worked towards nurturing and developing the students academically and spiritually. His approach and methodology centered on knowledge-action-propagation.

Shaykh ‘Abdul Karīm encouraged the youth to memorize the Qur’ān and he was particular on ensuring that they learn it according to the narration of *Ḥafs* from a master of the Qur’ān by the name of Shaykh Muḥyiddīn al-Kurdī. Due to his preoccupation with guiding the people he did not have time to write much in the way of books but he did write, for example, *al-Ma‘rifah fī Bayān ‘Aqīdat al-Muslim* and *Akhlāqunā al-Ijtima‘iyya*.

His Exemplary Character & Charity Work

One of the factors that contributed to the Shaykh’s success was his excellent personality and character - particularly his humility, his affection for the people and his moderation in his approach. His humility was apparent when he sat with the ‘Ulemā and with his students. He treated his students like his children and he never hesitated in giving them advice and even in making *du‘ā* for them. He loved his message because he was calling people to Allāh and he loved the people because he saw himself following the Prophets

example by guiding people and taking them from darkness to light. It is said that Shaykh ‘Abdul Karīm lived with his wife and children in a single room. One day some students came to him requesting that he teach them before Fajr because the mosques were still locked. His wife woke the children and carried them to the kitchen so that there was sufficient space in the room for the lesson to continue.

Despite being very busy in nurturing and guiding the people, he never neglected the poor and the downtrodden in the society. He worked towards establishing a charitable organization to take care of the poor, the weak, the widows and the orphans. The result of his efforts was the establishment of *Jamī‘at al-Birr wal-Ihsān* and *Jamī‘at Ighāthat al-Faqīr*. These two organizations concentrated their efforts in two suburbs of Damascus. When the above organizations expanded he co-operated with well wishers and ‘Ulemā to establish *Jamī‘at al-Nahdat al-Islamiyya* that was to take on the responsibility of the whole of Damascus. Shaykh ‘Abdul Karīm only appointed people of good character and sound faith to work for the organization.

He worked tirelessly and faced all obstacles with patience and perseverance. He always turned to Allāh in times of difficulty and he was well aware that his work was the work of the ‘Ulemā who are the heirs of the Prophets.

His Death

Shaykh ‘Abdul Karīm continued to serve the cause of Islam through propagation, teaching and guiding the people for about thirty years until he was afflicted with partial paralysis for about six months. About ten days prior to his demise he fell unconscious and he only awoke moments before his soul left his body when he took the name of Allāh. This was while his students were reciting verses 55-58 from Sūrat Yāsīn: ***“Verily the dwellers of Jannah, that Day will be busy with joyful things. They and their wives will be in pleasant shade reclining on thrones. They will have therein fruits and all that they ask for. (It will be said to them) Salām (peace) be on you, a word from the Lord most merciful.”***

The Shaykh passed away in 1973 (1393 H.) and he is buried in the graveyard known as *Bāb al-Saghīr*.

