

## MY JOURNEY SO FAR

**BY THE SAME AUTHOR:**

*Iraq: Searching for Hope* (Continuum, 2007)

*Suffer the Children* (Continuum, 2010)

*The Vicar of Baghdad* (Monarch Books, 2009)

*Faith Under Fire* (Monarch Books, 2011)

*Father, Forgive* (Monarch Books, 2013)

ANDREW  
WHITE  
*My* JOURNEY  
SO FAR



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*I dedicate this book  
to my mother,  
Pauline S. White*



# Contents

Acknowledgments		9
Foreword by	<TBA>	11
Chapter 1	An Unusual Beginning	13
Chapter 2	Turbulence	23
Chapter 3	Just Like Heaven	35
Chapter 4	Called by God	45
Chapter 5	The Academic Hothouse	51
Chapter 6	A Prophetic Word	61
Chapter 7	Life-defining Events	69
Chapter 8	A New Life	79
Chapter 9	Several Landmarks	87
Chapter 10	Sent to Coventry	95
Chapter 11	To the Middle East	105
Chapter 12	Return to Iraq	113
Chapter 13	The Road to Alexandria	123
Chapter 14	Relief and Reconciliation Go Hand in Hand	131
Chapter 15	Back to Coventry	141
Chapter 16	Brought Back to Life	153

Chapter 17	An Oasis of Healing	161
Chapter 18	Don't Take Care; Take Risks	169
Chapter 19	A Normal Day	181
Chapter 20	The Bigger Picture	189
Chapter 21	My Choice	197
Chapter 22	Very Special People	203
Afterword	Tariq Aziz	215
Epilogue	Late Fragment	219
Index		xx



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## CHAPTER 1

# An Unusual Beginning

My earliest memory is of being told how much Jesus loved me. I was brought up in a Christian household and my parents took every opportunity to reveal the love of God to me. Consequently, I cannot remember a time when I didn't know about Jesus: He was part of my life right from the beginning, and I loved Him just as much as He loved me.

Even without being told, I guessed that I should speak to Jesus every day, so I did. My parents would pray with me every night while settling me into bed, and then I knew that it was my time to talk with Him. My childlike prayer ran the same way each night:

*Dear Lord Jesus, I love you so much. Thank you for loving me so much too. Thank you for hearing and answering my prayers.*

To this day, I begin my night-time prayers with these same words. Until now I have never written them down, and doing so makes me feel like bursting into tears. I'm trying hard to avoid doing this, however, since I'm writing on an aeroplane!

I can't have been much older than two when I began praying that prayer – essentially, as soon as I could talk – but this is how real Jesus has been to me for my entire life. I hope this will explain why I cannot recall a single moment when I had what most people call a “conversion experience”. I had always loved Jesus and I knew in my heart that He loved me, so there was no “before and after” Jesus for me; there was just Jesus, ever present.

I have, however, never doubted the reality of my salvation. Even when I was studying theology at Cambridge, and was surrounded by a great number of doubting people, my faith was secure.

When I speak in churches, I like to tease the congregation by telling them that I have never been converted. People tend to react with a mixture of disbelief, shock, and horror!

Our household was a Christian one, but not Anglican. My father, Maurice White, was a staunch Calvinist, and my mother, Pauline, came from a classical Assemblies of God Pentecostal background. As a result, my faith was formed in a melting pot of church cultures. The act of coming to faith in the Pentecostal Church stream tends to emphasize “giving one's heart to Christ”. There are lots of altar calls in Pentecostal churches, which focus on encouraging people to “make a decision to follow Jesus”. As a child, I was slightly concerned for a while that I had never officially “given my heart to Jesus” and I wasn't entirely sure what it meant. In my childlike way, I tried to work out how one might do this, so I literally cut a heart shape out of paper in order somehow to give it to Him!

## A CONTENTED CHILDHOOD

I have only wonderful memories of the vast majority of my childhood, and I was an exceptionally happy child. With me were my sister, Joanna, two years older than me, and Mark, my younger brother by just eleven months. We were not a wealthy household – in fact, quite a poor one – but we were very content. Though poor, one thing we didn't lack were toys, of which there was an abundance because most of them were made by my father.

My father was of Anglo-Indian descent, coming from a somewhat strange tribe of British Indians who were a product of the Raj. He had grown up in a very distinguished, influential family, but had chosen to marry my mother, much to his family's disapproval. His parents didn't view her as having the "right" social background, since she came from humble, working-class stock. In due course my father was disinherited and he and my mother ended up living a simple life in a poorer part of London.

Yet Mother had a rich spiritual heritage. Her father had studied at one of the first Assemblies of God Bible colleges in the UK and, after graduation, went to work alongside Smith Wigglesworth, one of the greatest Pentecostal leaders of all time. Today I am good friends with Henry Fardell, Wigglesworth's great-grandson, and the Pentecostal pioneer's influence continues to reverberate down the generations.

My father was an exceptionally bright man. He had degrees in Biological Sciences, Civil Engineering, and Theology. He knew all the classical languages and could write fluently in both Latin and Classical Greek. But it was his grasp of mathematics that totally baffled me. He would try to teach me maths and I could never understand it. Of

his three children, I was considered the one with the nicest personality, but not the brightest.

Of the many toys that my father made for us, two in particular were very important to me. The first was a little wooden farmyard. It had authentic wooden outbuildings surrounded by a cluster of wooden trees. I would populate my farm with an array of plastic farm animals and spend hours just moving them around, acting out what I thought farm life must be like. One thing that was slightly different about my farm was that my favourite animal was a kangaroo! I don't know why, but I had a fondness for kangaroos. I also had a soft one, knitted by my mother, complete with a baby roo in its pouch.

My other memorable toy came when I was older and lasted for several years. It was the most amazing wooden go-cart. It was constructed mainly from wood, but my father built it like a vintage Rolls-Royce, with a properly functioning steering wheel, highly effective suspension, and a metal "bonnet" fashioned after the house-shaped angles of the Silver Ghost. It was simply an amazing piece of work, and I cherished it.

My pseudo-Rolls go-cart had one other interesting feature: the bonnet could be lifted up to reveal a storage compartment. Inside this I kept an extensive first-aid kit. As with my ever-present faith, I have always had a fascination with medicine. It is hard to say when this began, but during my go-carting years first aid was a major interest of mine.

It was no surprise to anyone that, aged nine, I decided to join the St John Ambulance Brigade. St John had the wonderful foresight to provide training for young boys and girls, thereby ensuring their legacy would continue into the future.

Thursday evenings were Brigade meetings and the highlight of my week, when we would come together for first-aid lessons and to practise the techniques we had already been taught. As I look back, forty years on, I am amazed by just how much I was taught, despite the fact that I was a child. But, for me, being taught something wasn't enough; I wanted to practise! So I began treating all the children in my neighbourhood whenever they had minor accidents. I know it sounds strange now, but if I heard that anyone had been hurt, I would go in my go-cart to find them, get my first-aid kit out, and treat them. My go-cart was like an unofficial junior ambulance. Eventually even the local doctor heard about and complimented me on my first-aid skills!

### SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The majority of my formative years were spent soaking up information like a sponge. While other boys were out playing football, I was on a steep learning curve, taking in equal measures of information about medicine and spirituality.

I remember that one of the first books that was ever read to me was Bunyan's *The Holy War*, which he wrote in 1682 while serving a twelve-year sentence in prison for preaching without a licence. Yes, my experiences were very different from those that most children had. I also recall being taught what were, in essence, complex theological concepts, so that by the age of six I could recite the five points of Calvinism with the acronym TULIP:

*Total Depravity*  
*Unconditional Election*

*Limited Atonement*  
*Irresistible Grace*  
*Perseverance of the Saints*

This I didn't just repeat parrot-fashion – I could actually say what each point meant.

Sundays were a mix of spiritual traditions. In the morning the whole family would attend a Strict Baptist Sunday school, followed by their morning service. Then we would rush home for our Sunday lunch, before heading to the large Assemblies of God church nearby for their afternoon Sunday school. We would take a packed tea with us and stay on for their evening service.

Just to add yet another dimension to my spiritual education, my father had an unusually philo-Semitic understanding of his faith, and therefore taught me not only about Christianity but also about Judaism. He showed me that Judaism was in fact the foundation of the Christian faith. I also became aware of the evils of anti-Semitism and learned about the Holocaust. Our family lived in an area of London that had traditionally been a Jewish neighbourhood and therefore had one of the largest Jewish cemeteries. As a young boy I took the issue of anti-Semitism very seriously, and though I had never seen the cemetery being attacked I was aware that it could be, so I would regularly go and stand outside its gates to “guard” it.

While other children were reading *The Beano* or *The Dandy*,<sup>1</sup> I spent my time reading about Judaism and medicine. By the age of ten my main reading material was *A Jewish*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Beano* is a British children's comic, published by D. C. Thomson & Co., which first appeared in 1938. *The Dandy* was published by the same company from 1937 to 2012.



*Theology* by Rabbi Louis Jacobs<sup>2</sup> and *An Introduction to Surgery*. Alongside these I would read many complementary works, spending hours in the local library searching out the right kind of books to take home and devour.

### WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GROW UP?

I remember one day at school when our form teacher informed us that we all needed to consider what we wanted to do when we grew up. Many of my peers had no idea what they wanted to do, but I was always very clear about it, if rather unconventional. I was keen to pursue my twin passions of faith and medicine. I knew enough about the latter to have established a specific area of interest: anaesthetics. I wanted to be both a priest and an anaesthetist, and told my teacher so. I was told that I could do one or the other, but not both.

I had a similar conversation with my parents. This time I was told that I could go into medicine if I wanted to, but I couldn't be a "priest" since I was a Strict Baptist and they didn't have priests. None of this deterred me, though. I felt that God had put this twin calling on my life and that, somehow, Jesus was going to help me to do all that I was supposed to do in life.

Around this time I made an unlikely friend who was to have a profound effect on my spiritual formation and help put me on the path towards becoming a priest. Living on the same road as our family was an old lady who was bedridden. No one ever laid eyes on her, but we often heard about "Miss Davis", especially from her sister, who lived

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<sup>2</sup> Published by Behrman House Publishing, 1973.

right next door to us. One day I asked our neighbour if I would be allowed to go and see Miss Davis, her sister. I was assured that she would love to meet me and the same day I was invited round to her house.

Immediately we became firm friends, and from that day forward Miss Davis became “Aunty Hilda” to me. I visited her almost every day and discovered that she had a profoundly deep faith in and love for Jesus. We would pray together about all manner of things; she was a wonderful lady. There was just one problem: Aunty Hilda was not a Baptist, or even a Pentecostal; she was a member of the Church of England. Sad to say, in the Baptist/Pentecostal circles I moved in during the seventies, Anglicans were not even considered “real” Christians. Yet it was clear to me that here was a lady of authentic faith, who knew God and loved Him deeply.

Because Aunty Hilda was unable to leave her house owing to ill health, her local priest would visit every week to minister Holy Communion. This same priest visited our school each week. Before long he invited me to go and visit Aunty Hilda’s church and I was most curious to see what it might be like, so I asked my parents’ permission and arranged to go.

In due course I entered a different world – church as I had never experienced it before. It was smells and bells and high-church Anglo-Catholic liturgy. To me as a ten-year-old boy, it seemed like a glimpse into what I imagined heaven was like, and I immediately fell in love with it.

This meant that my churchgoing activities were about to become considerably more complicated, with my Sundays spent dashing from one place to the next. My morning would begin with the Anglicans at 7.00 a.m., followed

by a rush to get to the Strict Baptist service and later the Assemblies of God service.

It was a clash of church cultures but I was drawn to the Anglican model of church and began attending more of Aunty Hilda's church's services. Each day after school, I would run out of the door in order to get to church in time for their Evensong service, which would be conducted according to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. On Saturdays I would also attend their Communion service. After a while I was asked if I would be a server. I was delighted to do so and greatly enjoyed dressing up in a robe. I recall walking to the church with the priest one Sunday morning and mentioning to him all the services I would be attending that day. He said to me, "Andrew, don't you get indigestion with all this church?"

I admit it was strange, but I loved it.