

A Heart Broken Open

Radical faith in an age of fear

RAY GASTON

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Acknowledgements

This book has had a very long gestation period! Many of the chapters started their life in another form. Chapters two and three were developed out of a presentation of story and song that Julie Greenan and I put together for the Together for Peace festival in Leeds in 2003, called 'Resistance and Love – Spirituality for Non-violent Struggle' and performed at St Anne's Cathedral, Leeds with later versions being performed at Northern Friends Peace Board in 2004 and at the Peace School in August 2007. Chapter four was developed through dialogue at various events organised within the Shi'a community in England and Iraq. During my time in Iraq I was invited to address a conference at Karbala University on a Christian's view of the relevance of Imam Hussein to the current situation in Iraq, which I entitled 'Is This Liberation?'. I was also invited to reflect on my experience in Iraq with the Shi'a community in England at events organised by the Ahlul Bayt Islamic Centre, Leeds, the Baab-Ul-Ilm in Shadwell, Leeds, the Behloul Society at the Masjid-Al-Husayn in Leicester and the Al Mahdi Institute in Birmingham. I am grateful for the quality of discussion and dialogue at all these events which helped me shape the final versions of the chapters of this book. Chapter six began life as a sermon delivered at All Hallows Church during Ramadan 2005,¹ entitled 'Lamentation and Love: "Natural" Disasters and Worship of the Triune God', a version of which appeared in the journal *Contact: Practical Theology and Pastoral Care* (Vol. 153), in 2006; this final version was delivered as a sermon in the chapel at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, in Ramadan 2009.

I am grateful to Annie, Firdaws and Hussein for their generous and thoughtful contributions to the Dialogue section of this book and to Salma for her powerful and considered introduction. Thanks also go to Neil Paynter at Wild Goose for his tireless work on getting my manuscript up to scratch for publication.

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Finally, I would like to thank the congregation at All Hallows and the folk of Hyde Park, Leeds for the privilege of ministering with and amongst them for eight years between 1999 and 2007. This book is about only a very small part of that ministry. All Hallows is a unique and vibrant Christian community with a wonderfully broad and inclusive vision and ministry – check it out if you are ever in the vicinity of Leeds!

I dedicate this book to Peter Dale, Christian pacifist and

friend to people of other faiths, whose quiet and persistent witness to peace and interfaith dialogue for many years is an inspiration to me.

I also offer this book in memory of two friends, both mentioned in these pages, who influenced and challenged me during my time in Hyde Park. Professor Hafiz Fateh Muhammad, Imam and scholar, and Pat Regan, mother, community activist and woman of faith. May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

Ray Gaston

Footnote

1. I have used the year of the Gregorian calendar throughout the book, even when referring to Islamic months, for reasons of brevity. The Islamic calendar of course is different, not only in its lunar nature – being 11 days shorter than the Gregorian calendar – but also because the first year of the Islamic calendar is dated from the time Muhammad and his followers emigrated to Yathrib, later known as Medina, from Mecca. This event, known as the Hijrah, happened in 622 of the Common Era – which would mean Ramadan 2005 CE was 1426 AH.

Introduction

Salma Yaqoob

The spiritual journey in this book spoke to me in a very personal way. Ray Gaston's story about the redemptive power of solidarity reflects my own experience. In the immediate aftermath of the terrible events of 9/11, I – like all other Muslims I knew – felt the most crushing sense of isolation. All of us knew our world as we had hitherto experienced it was about to be changed for ever. We worried about what the future held. Some of us experienced physical and verbal abuse. We gathered in each other's homes and debated about what countries we could emigrate to if things really got bad. The impact on me of any solidarity was profound. My experience of it came from non-believers, socialists and atheists who were inspired into action by their own sense of morality. It was also provided by Christians who opened their church doors for the anti-war movement to meet when many mosques were nervous to do so.

The experience of engagement in a mass anti-war movement, of marching side by side with tens of thousands of others, the majority non-Muslim, united in their solidarity with the people of Afghanistan and Iraq with whom they shared neither faith nor culture but a sense of humanity, did more to enhance a sense of Britishness in myself and other Muslims than any number of government citizenship classes! The story Ray tells of the solidarity his congregation provided to their Muslim neighbours is a profound and uplifting one. It was actions like these that helped me through the dark and difficult times, that gave me hope.

Ray hopes his book will serve to encourage in some small

way a greater dialogue and understanding between Muslims and Christians. He already has had that effect on me, through both his moving account of the practical ways he has reached out to Muslims (and his moral courage in being prepared to pay a price for doing so) and his frank reflections on his personal spiritual journey. These reflections were at once recognisable in that many of the issues he has grappled with, e.g. in terms of sincerity of intention, viewing political action for social justice through the prism of spirituality, examination of the practical implications of standing by moral principles, are ones that I have grappled with as a Muslim. They are particularly fascinating, however, in giving an insight into a Christian-specific framework. Furthermore, Ray shares how he examined his own beliefs through his interactions with Muslims, and was able to combine elements of Islamic thought and practice in a way that strengthened his own Christian faith and practice. By acting as an agent of change and at the same time being open to change himself, Ray exemplifies a powerful alternative to the polarising discourse which views difference as a threat, and entrenches people's positions with no potential for enrichment or development.

His book emphasises the need for dialogue between people of faith on the essence of what it means to love God. It is also very much a call to people of all faiths to examine how they relate their faith to action in the here and now, especially in relation to the poor and marginalised. The message of the gospels speaks to us today, and through them the message of Jesus is one that many Muslims, who also claim to love Jesus, would benefit from being reminded of:

'I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was

naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me.’ And when the righteous answered that they didn’t recall doing any of these things, he said, ‘As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’

In this post-9/11 world, intolerance and racism are increasing. In most Western countries their primary driver is Islamophobia, but intolerance against one minority group feeds intolerance against all. In Switzerland, a referendum is to be held on banning minarets throughout the country.¹ In Germany, France and Scandinavia debate rages over the right of Muslim women to wear Islamic dress. During the American Presidential campaign Republican and Democratic candidates were busy visiting Christian and Jewish groups, while keeping a safe distance from the large Muslim community. As one commentator notes: ‘In electoral terms, American Muslims are the new untouchables.’²

The insidious, morally corrupting nature of racism was captured in the photographs of Italian holidaymakers on a beach outside Naples, continuing to sunbathe close to the bodies of two drowned Roma sisters, apparently indifferent to their deaths.³ Ugly voices from the past are gaining confidence. The new ‘post-fascist’ mayor of Rome was welcomed in the heart of the city by hundreds of supporters who greeted him with straight-armed fascist salutes and chants of ‘Duce! Duce!’ Emboldened by a growing climate of intolerance, the Italian government has authorised the fingerprinting of the entire Roma population. Jewish community leaders warn that the measure could eventually lead to ‘exclusion from schools, separated classes and widespread discrimination’. Alarmed at the growing climate of racism, Pope Benedict has reminded Catholics that it is their duty to steer others in society away

from 'racism, intolerance and exclusion [of others]'.⁴ An editorial in Italy's most popular Catholic weekly, *Famiglia Cristiana*, speculated as to whether fascism was returning to Italy under another guise.⁵

In a poll on Islamophobia for the *Dispatches* programme, a third of Britain's Muslims said they or their family members have suffered abuse or hostility since 7/7, and over two-thirds of the wider British public thought that prejudice against Muslims has increased. Yet, at the same time, a majority of the public also continues to believe that the religion of Islam is to blame for the bombings.⁶ The association of Islam and all Muslims with a sinister and dangerous faith runs deep, and the hostility and suspicion with which Muslims are now viewed is something we are very much aware of. I worry about the kind of society my young children will come to adulthood in.

What responsibility do people of faith have in a world marked by intolerance and injustice? Surely, it must be to bear witness. To not allow ourselves to become indifferent to all God's children. To not allow our hearts to harden. To recognise the humanity of others and in the process reaffirm our own. All believers are united in our love and devotion to God. Our redemption and salvation lies in our realisation of that love. And what more profound realisation than our conscious efforts to awaken God's love in all those around us. For me the process in which the individual strives for his or her highest potential cannot be separated from the broader socio-political context in which we live. The more we are indifferent to injustice, poverty, war and oppression, the more spiritually diminished we become. The more we struggle against such injustices, the more we continuously widen the doors of our hearts to others, the more enriched spiritually we become, the closer

we are to God. This is a dialectical interaction between the struggle to raise our inner spirituality and our engagement with our external world. The writer and political activist Arundhati Roy provides a hymn of conscious reflection on both, which speaks to me as profoundly as many a prayer:

'To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never, to forget.'

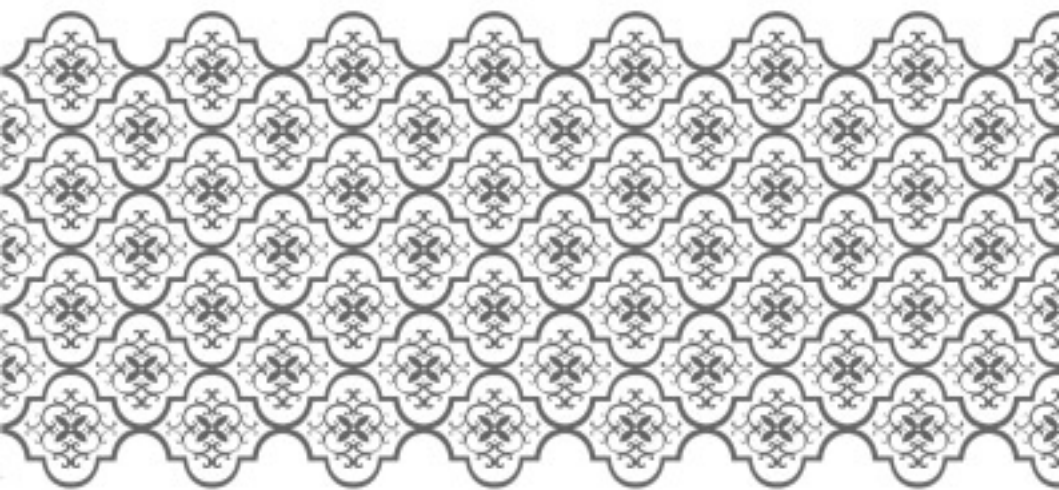
To bear witness. To seek the connection between our internal and external worlds. To love in the name of God.

Salma Yaqoob, 2008

Footnotes

1. 'This Persecution of Gypsies Is Now the Shame of Europe', Seumas Milne, *The Guardian*, Thursday, July 10, 2008
2. 'The New Untouchables', Lawrence Swaim, www.infocusnews.net/content/view/24264/615/
3. 'Italy's Gypsies Suffer Discrimination and Prospect of Draconian Curbs', *The Guardian*, Monday, July 21, 2008
4. 'Pope Appears to Back Warning about Fascism', John Hooper, *The Guardian*, Tuesday, August 19, 2008
5. 'Rise of the Right', Martin Jacques, www.guardian.co.uk, Wednesday, April 30, 2008
6. *Dispatches* is a Channel 4 news, politics and current events programme, www.channel4.com

Solidarity



Chapter one

Challenging Islamophobia

My friend runs a successful café in Hyde Park in Leeds, frequented by a very mixed clientele and popular with students in term times. His business by all accounts appears to be booming, but he talks of selling up and moving, not out of Leeds, but out of the UK. He is a Muslim, brought up in this country by parents who to all intents fitted the model of the media and government's 'integrated Muslim'. His father, who came over to the UK from Kashmir, fought for the British Army. A picture of the Queen adorned their living room alongside verses from the Qur'an and a picture of Mecca. A decade ago my friend would even have been seen drinking the odd glass of alcohol with his Jewish neighbour in the Leeds suburb into which he and his family had moved, an area not known for its large Muslim population.

Increasingly over recent years, particularly following 9/11 and then 7/7 and the corresponding assault in the media upon Islam, my friend returned to a more serious engagement with his faith. He wanted to have the knowledge to defend his heritage, and began attending mosque regularly and reading the Qur'an. He started playing recitals of the Qur'an in his café, instead of the contemporary rock, reggae and dance music he used to play, creating a peaceful, gentle ambience in comparison with the more noisy and busy feel of the café in the past. His beard has grown and he is determined to learn more Arabic so that he can read and study the Qur'an in greater depth. His suburban neighbours' reactions to his rekindled faith have not been positive: an elderly neighbour whose shop-

ping he had done for years asked that another neighbour do it instead; people who have been friendly acquaintances have become colder and less willing to engage in idle conversation. He senses an unease, disapproval and says he is considering taking his family back to Kashmir to live. My friend is no extremist nor even particularly political; he follows the traditionalist Sufi path of many Muslims whose heritage is South Asian. But he seriously wonders what kind of place Britain will be for Muslims when his children become adults. He is concerned for their future.

This is a very concrete example of the effects of what has come to be known as 'Islamophobia', the irrational fear and prejudice towards Islam that is in much of our media and is behind the intense scrutiny that the Muslim community has faced from government and media over the last few years. We do not hear or read about the hurt and fear that is generated within the Muslim community by this or about the effects this cultural mood has upon the everyday lives of ordinary devout Muslims. My café-owning friend clearly displays hurt when telling the story of his neighbours. He cannot see why what he has rediscovered in the beauty and truth of his faith should be seen by others as negative and a cause for them to view him as a threat.

Then there is the hijab: this visible symbol of faith challenges the secular aim to privatise religion. Naila, a community worker in Leeds, told me how she has been spat upon and verbally abused in the street and on public transport for wearing her hijab. In this culture, Muslim women are criticised for wearing hijab and stereotyped as oppressed for doing so, whilst the complex motivations of a woman of faith deciding to wear hijab, or indeed to not wear it, are ignored or trivialised. The

dynamism and leadership of many Muslim women of faith, on the ground in local communities and in the anti-war movement, is ignored or unrecognised.

We live in a culture of fear. We are encouraged by government and media commentators from the right and liberal left to think that there is something deeply problematic about Islam itself and that it poses a great threat to 'our way of life'. A *Financial Times* poll in August 2007 found attitudes to Muslims in Britain exceedingly negative in comparison with attitudes in other European countries. 'Terrorism' is constantly posed as a 'Muslim problem'; yet the rise of groups like Al-Qaeda is a complex part of geopolitical forces that have their roots in the cold war struggles of the '70s and '80s and in the foreign policies and covert operations of Western governments and intelligence, rather than something that is inherent to Islam. Indeed, genuine information of the phenomenon of so-called 'Islamic terrorism' is rare and most of what we hear about it from government and media sources is confused and contradictory.

In this climate, debate on the future of our world is stifled: anyone labelled a 'Radical Muslim' is considered a supporter of 'terrorism'. This catch-all term, which takes in many differing perspectives and groups, including those who argue for non-violent political struggle, marginalises potential contributions to the debate on the Middle East, global economics, international relations, Israel/Palestine and so on. Organisations with links and popular support in the Muslim-majority world are often dismissed, as they are labelled apologists for terrorism. An assumption is made that Islam needs to maintain a distinction between the spiritual and the political (something that most Muslims would see as absurd) to be accepted in Britain.

Media and politicians criticise Muslims for putting faith before nationality or patriotism, yet this is at the heart of a tradition like Islam, and indeed should also be so with Christianity, whose adherents are supposed to recognise a greater loyalty to and authority in God over and above any loyalty to or authority of a nation state. Such views are seen as suspect in mainstream secular political culture while they are basic to many Muslims' self-understanding.

It is the very fact that some Islamic groups bring religiously influenced politics back into the public sphere that is seen as so challenging to a secular politics that insists on a division between the spiritual and the political, and a wider secular culture that insists on the privatisation of religion.

We are rarely presented with positive and joyful images of Islam, yet this has been overwhelmingly my experience. One such experience was on a Friday evening at the beginning of a week of celebrations for the anniversary of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. My friend Assan took me to a large mosque in Bradford. The atmosphere was electric: many of the men were dressed in colourful traditional clothing, the smell of perfumes filled the air and I was greeted by many a passing stranger noticing my clerical collar and taking me warmly by my hand or greeting me with an open welcoming smile. When we finally managed to get into the main part of the mosque, after some simple food was served to us in the basement, I saw colourful banners adorning every side; ecstatic renditions of poetry to the Prophet were being recited and enthusiastically received by a congregation who exhibited a real sense of excitement, love and joy.

This book is a small attempt to counter the culture of Islamophobia. I want to share my real appreciation of Islam, telling

stories of what I have learnt from my Muslim brothers and sisters over the last six years since 9/11 and how my engagement with Islam has deepened my own Christian faith. That engagement with Islam has been mainly in the context of being a parish priest working in inner-city Leeds. My parish had four mosques in or near it and was featured in the news following the London bombings in July 2005: the 'bomb factory' was discovered in a flat only 100 yards from our church, set up as a base by people who did not live in the locality. We believe it was the five years of solidarity work and dialogue as a church community and our strong anti-war witness prior to 7/7 that allowed us to play a central role in the community's response to this crisis. It is the story of that work of solidarity and dialogue that is outlined in much of this book.

The final section of the book, entitled Dialogue, opens a space for responses. Annie Heppenstall responds as a Christian woman in dialogue with Muslims; Hussein Mehdi, my companion on the journey to Iraq, tells his side of the story; and Firdaws Khan responds as a Muslim involved in the anti-war movement.

The rest of the book is divided into two parts. This first part, Solidarity, tells the story of our developing relationships with the Muslim community through our peace witness post-9/11, and offers theological and spiritual reflection upon that, concluding with my trip to Iraq post-occupation in February/March 2004. Part two, Truth, keeps with the style of reflection inspired by story, but concentrates more on questions of theological interpretation between the two traditions of Islam and Christianity. Dialogue is presented as something that, far from threatening one's Christian faith, can in fact deepen and strengthen it. I want to encourage other Christians to enter

into a similar process of opening their hearts to Muslims, and to resist the culture of fear. This is a process that I believe involves us firstly in appreciating Islam, secondly in the repenting of our sins in relation to Islam and thirdly in witnessing to the truth as we know it in Jesus.

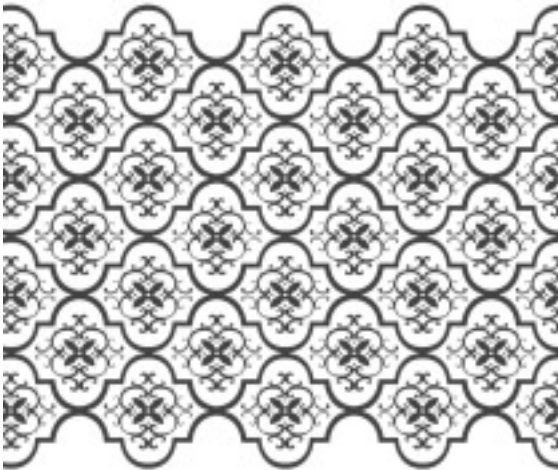
Throughout the book, truth in Jesus is articulated as a radical anti-imperialist and militantly non-violent Christianity that can join forces with Muslims and other communities to resist the increasing threat posed to God's planet and people by empire and global capitalism, and create spaces that reveal the truth of God's Kingdom, rooted in the unique vision of God that has been revealed to Christians in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That vision, I feel, calls us to mould a faith-inspired or *Theo* politics that is motivated by love and compassion and visions of discipleship and action that are about service, radical vulnerability and suffering for the truth. This struggle, this *jihad*, does not allow us as Christians to reject the imperial road of our mistaken contemporaries and ancestors in the faith, only to replace it with a passive pacifism that retreats from the world, but calls us to a new Church militancy that enters the fray of the world's violence and oppression armed only with a trust in God and compassion and love for all God's creatures. We need to recognise that the struggle against empire and capitalism is a spiritual struggle that requires not the demonising of any of God's creatures, be they presidents or suicide bombers, but the liberating of all from the wiles of what the New Testament witness calls the 'devil'. As the Letter to the Ephesians proclaims:

Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the

authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Eph 6: 11–18)¹

Footnote

1. All Bible quotations in the Solidarity section are from the NRSV.



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