**Faith, Hope & Love - Interfaith Engagement as Practical Theology**

**by Ray Gaston**

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This book is grounded in the experience of living alongside and learning from people of other religions in the diverse contexts of Leeds and West Midlands. The voice here is authentic, honest, reflective, and grounded as it mines for wisdom. There is a passion for how we might live with difference and diversity as being received as a gift from God. Gaston also offers his reader a clear and rigorous methodology of practical theological method. The chapters also reflect the skill of a theological educator whose methods and processes have been tested out at the Queens foundation for ecumenical theological education in Birmingham. Conversation partners and especially an impressive range of writers and ideas are named with carefulness and skill.

Any institution struggling for coherence and survival might be excused of an indulging self-preoccupation. While this may be the case for some churches in this country Gaston asks us to look outwards and reflect on what kind of society we live in in the UK. There are many alternatives to Christianity. Debates engaging in how we account for decline, particularly in relation to secularism, continue to shape public understanding of the nature and our comprehension of the many and complex practices that surround religion. We live in a society of many faiths and traditions. This is an opportunity rather than a threat in a country attempting to deal with systemic racism and its colonial past and properly questions whether Christianity can continue to have a privileged place in the public square.

Gaston faces some of these theological questions. He deals with issues of truth in this pluralistic ecology where the binary claims of exclusiveness and inclusiveness are held, debated, and preached. Where are we to look for truth? Has a liberal theology that so shaped the interfaith movement from the 1970s run its course? What kind of theology will equip people of faith to live together and learn from each other? This book names many of the core questions with insight but also the potential errors and conflicts that emerge from the violence that all religion has capacity to perpetrate and perpetuate.

The argument invites the reader to take multifaith consciousness seriously. It demonstrates the opportunities that are present in and through a careful attentiveness to the other. To be present in these situations of encounter we are offered a very different model of theological exploration. A dialogical theology that affirms the necessity of what Gaston calls an ‘intra-Christian engagement’ can enable witness, agency, and action. The reader is offered models for what is described as a more radical engagement which draws people together, listens to the variety and diversity of story and builds community. We need from this perspective, the book shows, a different kind of contact and dialogue. Finally, the book invites the reader to prioritise engagement with Islam. Gaston states, ‘the challenge of engagement with Islam for the Euro – American Christian is, I would maintain, an opportunity for growth and renewal in an age of spiritual and theological malaise in our Church.’  (p.x).

Divided into two parts the first part is an exploration of the method and practice of a practical theology of interfaith engagement grounded in the contexts within which Gaston has worked. Chapter 2 on the post-9/11 context is especially powerful in the way in which or to ethnography is used to deepen wisdom in and through engagement. Peace church tradition and the Wesleyan understandings of the way of salvation are used to explore how engagement might be and means of grace and an opportunity to deepen reconciliation.

Part two reflects on Islamophobia and multiculturalism in the complex context of competing political versions of truth in South Birmingham. These two chapters had resonance with this reviewer in the light of some of the contradictions and complexities of modern British life emerging out of these pandemic months. There is a comprehensive and helpful index and many primary and secondary sources that Gaston has drawn upon. They indicate a breadth and depth of learning which finds its shape in this illuminating and accomplished book.

My copy will find its way to Sarum College library but most importantly some of the learning represented here will certainly find its place in the formation of students for authorised public ministry. Gaston has established himself as an innovative and original practical theologian and we should look forward to further work from his engagement and study. This is practical theology at its best.

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