

Ray Gaston, All Hallows, Leeds

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Just before we meet, Ray Gaston reveals in his church newsletter that he has done his theological profile on the web-based Subversive Christianity 'blogspot'. This is how he looks:

Catholic 79 per cent, Neo orthodox 71 per cent, Emergent/Postmodern 54 per cent, Evangelical Holiness/Wesleyan 50 per cent , Classical Liberal 39 per cent, Charismatic/Pentecostal 29 per cent, Reformed Evangelical 25 per cent, Modern Liberal 18 per cent, Fundamentalist 0 per cent.

Which is interesting, not to mention a bit depressing, because I thought I was going to meet a modern, liberal, Anglican priest. That was the whole point of the interview, to show that the conservative evangelicals aren't the only ones with a congregation but that the liberals can pack 'em in, too. If anyone can prove the point then surely it's the Reverend Ray Gaston, Vicar of All Hallows in Leeds, a lively church with a radical agenda, and the man who organised the MCU's conference in 2000. And yet here he is scoring a measly 18 per cent for 'Modern Liberal' on the theological scale. Something, clearly, is awry.

I take some comfort from the *nil points* for Fundamentalist and catch the train to Leeds. (Unable to resist the challenge, I have scored in the high nineties for 'Modern Liberal' – but then, I have just read Jack Spong's latest book, so am probably leaning even more towards the sceptic/atheistic than usual).ⁱ

The notice on the door of the brick-built 1970s church at the top of the hill in the run-down Hyde Park area of Leeds – 'Sorry. Breakdancing class cancelled tonite' – and the man on the doorstep clutching his roll-up and his can of lager, raise my hopes: as does the sight of the cheerful folk running the cafe immediately inside the church.

They're northern, welcoming, casual, friendly. It's all beginning to look like the very model of a liberal church. Or at least my idea of one.

I'm directed to the vicarage, immediately adjacent. If we harbour any longer, and a lot of us do, an image of a Church of England vicar, Ray Gaston isn't it. With his dark, Rastafarian-style hair and slightly dishevelled appearance – not a dog collar in sight except on Nellie, his ageing border collie – he looks a long way from being a pillar of the established church. So my hopes rise again. Seventy per cent neo-orthodox, nearly 80 per cent Catholic? Surely not. (The 50 per cent evangelical I can't even think about).

So his opening words are hardly encouraging.

"I don't regard myself as a liberal any more. I'm increasingly orthodox theologically. Jesus, the Cross, the resurrection, the whole biblical narrative – these are the things that are absolutely central to my faith."

He talks about the gospel narrative, about accepting that narrative as it is and engaging with it, about the "evangelical impulse" that brought him back to the church nearly 20 years ago as a young adult (he's now 45). To the ears of one whose theological profile is 'modern liberal' it all sounds a bit – well, conservative.

Conservative evangelical, even. All in all, something of a surprise.

"What do the labels mean? Orthodox, conservative, liberal, evangelical?" he asks as an opener. "We all use them, but I don't think they're helpful. Look at the gay question. We have a strong gay/lesbian presence at All Hallows. There is no doubt that gays and lesbians should be full members of the body of Christ. But this isn't a 'liberal issue', many of the most interesting writers on theology and sexuality are coming from a very orthodox position, finding a real radical agenda in tradition that subverts the rather stale arguments of current liberal and conservative positionsⁱⁱ

“I would describe myself as openly orthodox theologically, whose faith is rooted in the biblical narrative. But an orthodox approach to faith and the Bible is not anti-gay. The story of the Bible is the story of God’s working with, and deep involvement in, humanity. “

It’s the biblical narrative that Ray Gaston is concerned with, not selective texts used to prove a point. And this, perhaps, is what separates him from the so-called biblical fundamentalists: ‘so-called’ because in some ways he *is* a biblical fundamentalist in that he believes a proper understanding of, and engagement with, the Bible is fundamental to the Christian faith. Which brings us back to the labels.

“I used to regard myself as a liberal, but I don’t any more. I think that the modern liberal agenda is an individualistic, bourgeois agenda and in fact I believe liberalism is the other side of the fundamentalist coin. They seem to argue on the same level. Both are searching for and arguing about truth as fact, but truth isn’t just about empirical evidence *about* proof or about assenting to a series of propositions.

“Take the Credal statements. These are what we need to hold onto, but we flatten them into propositional statements about God rather than understanding them as being a shorthand for the story of God in scripture. So we start talking about the term almighty, for example, as meaning God’s omnipotence – a philosophical concept – instead of returning to the Biblical narrative and seeing the word’s roots in the story of Yahweh and his opposition to empire and oppression within Judah and Israel . What is a powerful affirmation of our loyalty to God over loyalty to any of the world’s false powers becomes a site for philosophical argument, rather than the amazingly revolutionary sense of God that is unique to the Christian story.

“I love Jack Spong, and I admire him. I’ve invited him here to preach and regard him as a friend. But I think he gives over far too much to the scientific world view and in doing so he has just replaced biblical fundamentalism with a new certainty. Any

intelligent theologian has to engage with the scientific view, but he's become a sort of scientific fundamentalist."

On reflection it seems a pretty harsh condemnation.

I ask Ray what he means when he says, as he does, that Jesus Christ is the revelation of God. Does he mean that Jesus was God walking about on earth? Is that the meaning of incarnation? He quotes David Jenkins – "God is as He is in Jesus, and there is hope" – which is too enigmatic for my liking, and I think he could just as well have quoted Spong: "Being a Christian . . . is not to be a religious human being: it is to be a whole human being. Jesus is the portrait of that wholeness, and that is why he is for me, in his complete humanity, the ultimate expression of God."

Still, I don't put it to him because to be honest I don't remember Spong has said it until I look it up after the interview. But it proves the point that labels are slippery things, and labelling Spong, for whom many theologians in the liberal tradition have a less than high regard, a scientific fundamentalist – even a 'sort of' one – might just be on the harsh side.

If the labels don't matter, the practical application of theology to everyday life surely does, and even a brief encounter with Ray Gaston, which this necessarily is, is evidence of that. In the modern jargon, he walks the talk.

When he says that "witnessing to the reality of God's love in your action. That's what being church is all about" there is proof. Not just in his arrest in October 2002 during an anti-war protest in Leeds; not just in his hospitality to three asylum seekers – living in the All Hallows vicarage at the time of the interview, supported by the congregation both financially and in their fight to stay in the UK – or even in the setting up of an Iraq Solidarity Fund after his visit there in 2004: but also in the church's open door to the local community. Volunteers run the community café for those who want to drop in for a cup of tea and a chat or a cheap but nourishing lunch.

He was brought up in a “very conventional, lower middle-class, Anglican home” in Gloucester. A long way removed from the northern city where he now seems so much at home.

“My parents were devout Anglicans who lived their faith in simple ways through hospitality, and who found strength in their faith as they struggled with the reality of chronic and life-threatening illness. Mum was a nurse and she brought a young nurse who had nowhere to live into our home and she became one of the family. They befriended an Indian Christian family who were settling in Gloucestershire. So I had a very practical idea of faith given to me from the start, an example of practical, caring Christianity.”

Then, when still comparatively young, 12 or 13, he had a kind of reverse conversion, a deep questioning, and ultimate rejection, of the concept of a loving, almighty God.

“I remember watching a programme with my dad about the Battle of the Somme and being really shocked, and over a period of time I became disillusioned and questioning about all this God stuff. I said I did not want to go to church any more and my parents respected my decision totally.

“Then I got involved with left-wing politics and Marxist groups and became very strongly anti-Christian. It’s interesting that I continued to define myself in relation to Christianity while adopting a very pro-Marxist, left-wing philosophy, so in some sense I suppose it never left me.”

While still a full-time political activist, and having dropped out of university, in his early 20s he headed for Dublin and ended up working with people with HIV/Aids.

“I remember a Roman Catholic priest, Fr Bernard Lynch, who had a very big influence on me. He was in trouble with his order in Ireland because he had been working in New York in the USA with the gay community who at that time were really being decimated by Aids and also faced massive amounts of hostility and violence .

He spoke to Aids workers in Dublin about his work and his faith in Jesus Christ – a very different kind of Jesus from the respectable one we are often presented with. That view of Jesus has never left me: a radical figure who stands alongside the marginalised and oppressed. It was about this time that I stopped being so militantly atheistic.”

In 1987 he came to Leeds and worked as project co-ordinator for the Leeds Aids Advice Centre, and in 1988 started to attend All Hallows, a radical church under the care of the then vicar, Stanley Baxter.

“I was a regular communicant, and I loved the whole liturgical experience. It was through the liturgy, and through working with people with Aids, that I re-discovered my faith. I often say people with Aids converted me to Christ and very few of them were Christians. The liturgy and the eucharist, it slowly began to dawn on me, spoke of what was what was happening to people with HIV/Aids.”

On retreat in a convent near Whitby – “with a lot of Anglican nuns in wimples: I couldn’t have looked more out of place” – he had what he calls a ‘Yes to God experience’ while reading Psalm 139 after a Eucharist. (“O Lord, you have searched me and known me.”)

He talks about all this with an unusual – for some of us – and slightly unnerving, lack of embarrassment. He says, among other things, “We are empowered by the spirit to witness to God’s love if we but open our hearts.”

I tell him that phrases like this, or about “witnessing to the power of the spirit” or even, heaven forbid, “God redeems the universe and Christ is central to that,” feel, to me, not just alien but gut-wrenchingly embarrassing. I can’t do it.

“I know, but I don’t know why. Muslims talk about their faith without embarrassment. Christians often are not able to. Coming to an area where Ramadan is observed” – the area is 15 per cent Muslim – “you know about it. You don’t know about the

Christian Lent. There is a simplicity about Islam; but our faith isn't so easy to explain. I love Islam for the lack of performance. People just go to the mosque and pray. It's the other side of me. I love the Anglican liturgy, but when I visit the mosque I find it a deeply spiritual and liberating experience."

And Ray does attend the Mosque: All Hallows maintains strong links with the Makkah Mosque on Brudenell Road and the Grand Mosque nearby and the Shia Islamic Centre in the neighbouring parish. His attendance is more than a wishy-washy expression of tolerance, or a nod in the direction of multi-culturalism.

"If you ask why I'm a Christian rather than a Muslim, then I have to say it's the cross, the resurrection, the incarnational element of Christianity that I love and relate to. I really believe we need to hold onto what we have been given, and need to encourage other faiths to hold on to what *they* have been given and engage with each other. As Christians we are called to take the first step, and I feel called to a strong engagement with Muslims."

So strong, in fact, that he's relinquishing his eight-year tenure of All Hallows, and by the time this is published will be doing an MPhil at the Centre for the Study of Islam and Muslim-Christian relations at Birmingham University. Beyond that, he enters uncharted territory with plans to return to Leeds in autumn next year to develop a grassroots Christian-Muslim dialogue initiative.

Limited funding is pledged, but nothing like enough yet to see him through the first three years.

"I think it is critical that we engage with Muslims, not in a wishy-washy 'we're all in this God business together' sort of way, and not out of fear that the Muslims are somehow intent on taking us over or being co-opted into a government-inspired 'cohesion' agenda, but out of a genuine desire to engage with Islam, and it's call to surrender to God, as people of faith. A Muslim friend of mine says that the only time

he knows that his heart is ruling his head is when he is prostrate in prayer – that’s beautiful. And as Christians we need to have the humility and confidence to share the radical love of God we know in the story of Jesus Christ.

“Engaging with the Islamic community has made me a better Christian. It has forced me to look more closely at my own tradition.”

This engagement was always central to his ministry at All Hallows, but it was brought into sharp focus after the events of 9/11.

“As a church we stood up against the Afghan war, the war in Iraq, the so-called war on terror. After 9/11 we felt it was important to say to our Muslim neighbours that we did not hold them responsible for what had happened, challenging the minority who used the events of 9/11 to vent their deep-seated Islamophobia. People who had lived in this area all their lives, who’d been born here, felt hostility at the time. A teacher told me that a Muslim woman arrived at school in tears after she had been spat upon in the local post office. Another Muslim woman brought up in the area all her life suddenly felt a stranger.”

On the website (<http://solidarityandtruth.wordpress.com/>) where he outlines details of his forthcoming project, Ray Gaston quotes theologian Leonardo Boff, who himself draws upon St Francis’ model of engaging with Islam

“We must seize the initiative; we should not wait for the other to come to us. We must trust others because they are our brothers and sisters. We must live, work and insert ourselves in the other’s world. We must place ourselves in minor and servile positions, and we must renounce pretension that we are superior or privileged because we are Christians. We must realise that it is better to understand than to be understood, it is better to love than to be loved, and we must also make ourselves an instrument of peace. We must put everything in the context of prayer and spirituality.

We must always connect human peace with God's peace so that peace is long-lasting and complete."

On the train home I mentally re-do Ray Gaston's theological profile and reflect that I can, after all, pin a label on him. Easy, really. Christian: 100 per cent.'

Ends

[www:allhallowsleeds.org.uk](http://www.allhallowsleeds.org.uk)

ⁱ Spong, John Shelby: *Jesus for the Non Religious*, HarperCollins, 2007

ⁱⁱ See for instance the work of Gerard Loughlin and Eugene Rogers and for a charting of the journey from liberal gay rights theology through liberationist models to a more radically Orthodox 'Queer' Theology see Elizabeth Stuart Gay and Lesbian Theologies: *Repetitions with Critical Difference*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003

On the Bible [separate box]

He cites Third Isaiah, Ezra and Nehemiah to show that the gay debate – or something very like it – portrayed as a relatively recent obsession, mainly within Anglicanism, has been going on for at least two and a half thousand years. As indeed has the current anxiety, some would say xenophobia, about immigration, economic migrants, and asylum seekers. Which, as it happens, is another matter close to his heart.

"The whole debate within Israel is about inclusion and exclusion, who should be in and who out. But the debate has been going on for all time; it's not new. Ezra wants to purify everything, and you have the whole ethnic cleansing passage in there [chapters 9 and 10], and then you have Third Isaiah which is written about the same period. It's all about bringing in the eunuchs and not excluding the foreigners [Isa. 56.

1-8]. That idea of the expansion of the vision of God is not just confined to an understanding of Judaism. It's a continuing struggle within Christianity. Expansive catholic, in the true sense of the word, versus a closed vision about purity.“

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