

“It is okay to question Allah”: the theology of freedom of Saiid Rabiipour, a Christian ex-Muslim

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Abstract: The author presents a theological analysis of *Farewell to Islam*, by Saiid Rabiipour (Xulon 2009, 348 pages). In analyzing Rabiipour’s writing he argues that Rabiipour’s experience of being trapped in Iran should be read as a metaphor for Islam, both as a religion and as a political structure. In American Christianity Rabiipour finds a space of freedom and liberation. Utilizing the extended metaphor of his *de facto* captivity in Iran, Rabiipour offers both an American, Christian apologetic, and a critique of Islam as a religion and a politic.

Key Words: liberation theology, Iranian Christianity, ex-Muslim, Muslim-background believer, MBB, freedom

Farewell to Islam is the auto-biography and conversion narrative of Saiid Rabiipour, an Iranian-American ex-Muslim evangelical Christian. As I have argued in the article “Your swords do not concern me at all”: The Liberation Theology of Islamic Christianity², I believe that ex-Muslim Christians are indubitably engaged in the activity of theology-making, but that rather than writing articles for theological journals or systematic theologies, many of them communicate and craft their theologies in their conversion narratives. The argument is developed in that article, and I have also applied this sort of analysis to *Into the Light* (OM Publishing 1986), the conversion narrative of Pakistani convert Steven Masood³. In this article I will outline Rabiipour’s life and then analyze his book as a theological text. I will argue that Rabiipour is engaged in the activity of theology-making, and that his theology is indeed a form of liberation theology that associates salvation with freedom to engage in critical discourse. According to Rabiipour, that freedom exists in Christianity but not in Islam. Or one might say analogously, the prophet from Nazareth confers such freedom, while the prophet from Mecca forbids it.

1. The Life of Saiid

Rabiipour was born in 1953 in Tehran where he was also raised. As a young man he enlisted in the navy and was sent to the United States to study English and mathematics. During his time in the USA he became exposed to the Christian faith and fell in love with Ursa, whom he would later marry. Near the end of his military training he decided to go AWOL and stay in the USA rather than return to Iran to serve in the navy there. He did this, was baptized, married, and had children. He eventually became a manager at Radio Shack where he worked for over 30 years. After he became a Christian he decided that he would like to return to Iran periodically to see family and share the Gospel there. He

² Duane Alexander Miller, “Your Swords do not Concern me at all”: The Liberation Theology of Islamic Christianity’ in *St Francis Magazine* Vol 7:2, April 2011, pp 228-260.
<www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/11.%20Duane%20Miller%20SFM%20April%202011.pdf>

³ Duane Alexander Miller, ‘*Into the Light: the liberation theology of Steven Masood, a Christian ex-Muslim*’ in *St Francis Magazine* Vol 6:4, August 2010, pp 630-637.
<www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/3_SFM%20August%202010.pdf>

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was able to do this once without any trouble. In 2005 he went to visit again and encountered some problems, and much of the material in the book is about this part of his life. Rabiipour had retained Iranian citizenship while also being granted US citizenship. He had trouble with the Iranian government though because he had gone AWOL and the government wanted him to pay back the money which had been used to train him since he never went to work for them.

His Iranian passport is taken from him, attempts to leave the country are stymied, and his attempts to resolve the issue and pay back a reasonable sum to the government are also frustrated. He is sent from one office to another and makes no progress. “Dealing with the Iranian government was an unending circle of frustration and dishonesty” (213). Finally he is called to speak with someone at the security building and he concludes that he is going to be tossed in jail and tortured, which is not an unrealistic prediction. He decides he must leave and return to the USA where his wife and children are, even without his Iranian passport, and even if he can’t leave through the airport (security won’t let him). He hires people to smuggle him into Turkey, and from there makes his way back to the USA with the help of the Turkish police and the American Embassy. In other words, most of the book is not really about how he became a Christian, but about his time in Iran and the difficulties he faced there. Moreover, the reason for his being trapped in Iran is not related to his conversion to Christianity. In the end he is reunited with his family and he ends his book with a section addressing some final issues about Islam and Christianity, and Muhammad and Jesus.

His narrative is linear, from the beginning of his life through his childhood, to the USA and marriage and conversion, and then to the main part in Iran and his escape from there. In terms of his audience he is serving as a translator really—including many explanations of Islamic and Persian customs and foods and places. This is a common marker of diaspora literature. But he is also writing for Muslims who may not know much about the USA or the West in general, and explains aspects of Western culture too. Peppered throughout the book are paragraphs on apologetics, the Bible, and the Qur’an. It is, on the whole, an agreeable combination of reflection, apologetic and narrative, and

will keep the attention of some readers who have no interest in reading a book of systematized apologetics.

2. The Liberation Theology of ex-Muslim Christians

The concept of liberation theology is often associated with Latin America or perhaps Palestine or Black Power thought. Based on the work of Robert Schreiter in his book *Constructing Local Theologies*⁴ I find that the theology produced by ex-Muslim Christians is an *organic* contextual liberation theology. By organic I mean that it is the kind of contextual theology proposed in the 1970’s by Taiwanese pastor and educator Shoki Coe⁵. That contextualization is the continuation of indigenization, and presupposes that while contextualization may be carried out *with* foreigners, it can never be carried out *by* them.

When I use the word ‘contextualization’ I am not referring to that passes for contextualization in much of American evangelicalism. The sort of thing popularized by Phil Parshall in his *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* [Baker House 1980], for instance, could never be contextual theology according to the original theory of Coe, and as elaborated by Schreiter. Coe was responding to, and rejecting, that line of thinking, actually—that the foreigners could do the theology *for* the indigenous church⁶.

Liberation theology is a form of contextual theology according to Schreiter. It aims at transforming the social order and reforming or replacing *unjust social structures*. Those may have been economic structures for the churches in Latin America in the 80’s, but after my study of the writings of ex-Muslim Christians (and not just Americans writing

⁴ Robert J. Schreiter *Constructing Local Theologies*. London: SCM 1985. Also see his more recent treatment of globalization which will be of interest to scholars of migration and diaspora studies: *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local*. New York: Orbis 1997.

⁵ Shoki Coe ‘In Search of Renewal in Theological Education’ in *Theological Education*, Vol 9:4, Summer 1973, pp 233-43 and Shoki Coe ‘Theological Education—a Worldwide Perspective’ in *Theological Education*, Vol 11:1, Autumn 1974, pp 5-12.

⁶ I develop this line of thinking in more detail in a lecture given at Nazareth Evangelical Theological Seminary in April 2012 titled ‘Contextualization: why Catholics get it and Evangelicals don’t’. The audio for this lecture is available at duanemiller.wordpress.com/2012/04/14/part-1-contextualization-why-catholics-get-it-and-evangelicals-dont/

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about them, or about what they *should* think, and what form of congregations they *should* form) I learned that a key theme uniting many of these writings, most of them autobiographical conversion narratives, was a desire to see their Islamic cultures transformed by the message of the love of God in Christ. Moreover, specific unjust structures were named in those books—the Shari’a stipulation that Muslim apostates must be killed, for instance, is seen as unjust. Religious intolerance and forcing ex-Muslim Christians to flee their countries, or firing them from their jobs, or causing their families to turn against them—these are unjust actions born of unjust social structures, and the texts of the ex-Muslims seek to overturn them. Forbidding Christians from evangelizing Muslims—that is unjust and must be subverted. For British-Pakistani convert Hannah Shah, author of *The Imam’s Daughter*, it is the forced marriages of young British ladies of Asian ancestry to relatives from ‘back home’ that is unjust.

The program for liberation envisioned in these texts is itself evangelism. That is, Islamic societies around the world must be transformed, and these unjust social structures replaced, reformed, or subverted, as more and more Muslim become Christians. By way of comparison, in Latin America having a certain number of mestizos guaranteed a seat in parliament might be seen as a successful outcome of liberation theology. Regarding the original Latin American liberation theology movement, Mariano Avila –Arteaga writes that

Liberation theologians taught that theology is always done in a historical context, from a social location, and in response to issues and challenges coming from that context. [...] What was needed was an “orthopraxis”, which would become a new way of doing theology, beginning with a commitment to change the context.⁷

All liberation theology results in praxis—in *doing*—not just in thinking and talking about ideas. Latin American liberation theology resulted in the praxis of the base groups, *this* liberation theology results in evangelism. It is evangelism that will subvert the unjust social structures present in Muslim lands that are oppressing the people, therefore Rabiipour is explicitly intent on sharing the Gospel with Muslims, and inviting them to consider conversion.

⁷ ‘Liberation’ in *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, John Corrie ed (IVP 2007).

3. Saiid Rabiipour’s Theology of Freedom

The key theological theme in Rabiipour’s book is freedom. While he was in naval college in the USA, he was able to go back to Iran for a vacation. He remarked, “I became very apprehensive and uncomfortable, because my mind could not digest the amount of freedom that was available there. However, after my trip to Iran in 1975 [while at the naval college], I realized how much there was to appreciate about [the USA]” (75). In furthering this view he presents an apologetic for freedom to the Muslim who might say, “Freedom leads to license! Just look at the smut on TV and the problems with drug abuse and alcoholism and promiscuity!” Rabiipour could well have given a riposte that these issues are problematic in Iran too, but he does not⁸. Rather, he explains that freedom is a good thing, and that while it can be abused, it need not necessarily lead to excess. He gives the example that while in America he may consume alcohol, he chooses not to. Compare this benign picture of life in the diaspora to post-Revolution Iran, which is characterized by a decline in freedoms across the board:

Under the Islamic regime many things changed. Women lost their freedom and were forced to cover their whole body including their hair. Men were not allowed to wear shorts. The Iranian education curriculum, though it used to have some religious study, became more Islamic at all levels, including universities. Many faced harsh punishments and imprisonment by questioning the motives of this new regime or opposing Islamic government by suggesting that religion should not be involved in the politics of Iran. (36)⁹

The single narrative which dominates the book is his time in Iran in 2005 when he was prevented from leaving. It can be read as an extended metaphor for Islam itself: one continues to strive, going from this place to that, talking with this person or that, all the while never knowing who is helping him and who is thwarting his attempt to return to his family. For Rabiipour there was no clarity, but much action, no progress, but many

⁸ Prostitution and drug addiction are rampant in Iran, according to many reports. For example, see Karim Sadjapour ‘The Ayatollah under the Bed(sheets)’ in *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2012. Accessed 24 April 2012 <www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/04/23/the_ayatollah_under_the_bedsheets>. On drug addiction see Azarakhsh Mokri ‘Brief Overview of the Status of Drug Abuse in Iran’ in *Archives of Iranian Medicine*, Vol 5:3, July 2002, pp 184-190. Accessed 24 April 2012 <www.ams.ac.ir/AIM/0253/0253184.PDF>.

⁹ For a good study on the deterioration of women’s rights in post-Revolution Iran see Ali Akbar Mahdi ‘The Iranian Women’s Movement: A Century Long Struggle’ in *Muslim World* Vol 94:4, October 2004, pp 427-448. For more information on the economic stagnation there during the same period see in the same issue Hamis Zanganeh ‘Socioeconomic Trends in Iran: Successes and Failures’ (pp 481-494).

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words. And this was an Islamic government. The implication is that Islam can talk about justice but cannot provide it. Indeed, the Islamic government was oppressive and unjust and corrupt, while the system of the Christians in the American diaspora was perceived as open and free: “As I was searching, this freedom that belonged to Christians fascinated me and I wanted to be like them. I felt free to ask questions or discuss any subject in public or private without fear; something I could not do in Iran” (298). My interpretation of his theology of freedom here is that while freedom may be accompanied by the danger of license, it is also accompanied by the benefit of providing the human with a space to flourish and grow in his relation with God and fellow humans. A lack of freedom is accompanied by dangers of oppression and power-mongering, and rather than exterminating the possibility of license merely drives it underground or dresses it in the robes of fraudulent holiness—a much more pernicious situation.

The final chapter of his book is mostly apologetic and contains his own reflections on aspects of Islam and the Qur’an. He is not aggressively polemical, nor does he feel there is nothing of value in the Islam and the Qur’an, but he does present an unequivocal critique of Islam and attempts a vindication of Christianity and the Bible. His theology of freedom reaches its culmination in the following statement, taken from this final chapter:

You may ask why I find it necessary to question Allah or his writings since I have been taught not to do so from an early age. My answer is that it is okay to question Allah if you don’t understand it. In fact I believe Allah loves it when his people question him. I am not arrogant in my questioning. (302, 3)

In Rabiipour’s discourse we find a strong conviction that freedom is a holistic and integral state. Political freedom and religious freedom and interior, spiritual freedom all go hand in hand. This constitutes a rejection of the Islamic picture of humans relating to God as his slaves: “Part of the freedom that I am talking about is the freedom of [the] inner man. It feels like a peaceful wind that brushes and touches one’s spirit and heart. You feel complete!” (77) Christ and his community, which Rabiipour encountered in the USA, were characterized by hospitality, openness and a willingness to discuss even the

most central aspects of the Christian faith without resorting to vitriol or anger. The government of the USA (and secular Turkey as well) were not perfect in helping him in his plight, but they were not the maze of religious obfuscation and circumlocution that trapped him in Iran. Freedom and responsibility can be balanced—in Christianity, at least. This is why he can, in a humble manner, question God himself. And God does not mind.

In addition to a liberation theme, the autobiographical texts (which are all theological texts) written by ex-Muslim Christians like Rabiipour also have an element of wisdom theology in them. That is, they try to impart wisdom about life and decisions and relations in narrative form, both by giving positive examples and negative examples. When Rabiipour does not understand how to deal with the difficult Messianic title “Son of God”, he humbly asks God for guidance and help to understand what it means. He does not simply say, “Well, Christianity is obviously wrong!” but nor does he ignore his desire for knowledge and understanding (which his Islamic upbringing had told him to do). He asks God, because *it is okay to question Allah*. And over the years God answers, according to his narrative. Other aspects of the wisdom theology here are related to prayer—sometimes God does answer prayers miraculously, sometimes not, you never know what will happen. And family: don’t think you will always be the only believer in your family, other people in his family became believers. Other examples could be given of the author using instances from his own life as lessons on what to do in certain occasions, or what not to do.

Freedom is available in Christ. Freedom to question, to have a good marriage that is not based on manipulation and coercion, but mutual love, freedom from the corrupt precepts of Islamic rule, and freedom to ask questions, even of God himself. For his Christian audience the author hopes they will be encouraged in their faith and more knowledgeable about Iran and Islam. For the Muslim reader he has presented a capable apologetic intertwined with his narrative about freedom. Repeated several times throughout the book is the invitation—try this out, test it, choose freedom. Choose

Christ. Ask God your questions—he’s not afraid. That is Rabiipour’s invitation to his readers.

4. A Freedom Born out of Love

In a previous article on the liberation theology of ex-Muslim Christians, after reading material by several ex-Muslim theology-makers, I note that “there is a strong hermeneutic of the love of God being the heart of the Christian faith that resurfaces again and again” (Miller 2011:247). In Rabiipour’s theology, the loving relationship with God frees a person from fear of punishment—a sort of liberation in and of itself. Within the context of this loving relationship the person is then free to obey, not out of fear, but because of gratitude and love. This has led him to the conclusion that “...in my experience, true freedom has its link to Christianity” (Correspondence with author, May 2012). I asked him, “Do you feel like people in Islam cannot experience that freedom?” His answer was “No, not in a true sense.” But in the context of a free relationship with God, one not based on fear of punishment and deception (like his endless running around in Iran), one is free to the point where even if he does sin and violate that relationship, he knows that forgiveness is available.

All of this entails a close link between the hermeneutic of love and freedom. The hermeneutic of love privileges the *agape*, sacrifice-love of God above other aspects of the divine being, making it the lens through which everything else is interpreted and construed, hence the word *hermeneutic*, meaning a principal of interpretation.

While Rabiipour starts with a conventional evangelical soteriology, he ends up with a challenging theology of freedom which is intertwined with a critique of Islam and its structures. The Muslim reading his book may well work backwards through his argument: The Islamic state does not and cannot provide either justice or freedom, and this necessarily mirrors a spiritual truth. Freedom can lead to license, but practically speaking many Muslims prefer freedom, even though some may indeed abuse it. Christianity provides this spiritual, interior freedom, which corresponds to the fact that many countries with freedom tend to have a strong, Christian heritage, historically speaking. *Ergo*, Jesus Christ is Lord. Being trapped in Iran is a metaphor: Islam tried to trap him, demean him, lie to him, rob him of his

freedom. But he was saved. Saved by being smuggled into Turkey (his Exodus—to use a favorite theme of the older, Latin American liberation theology), but also saved by Christ on the cross who welcomes him into a loving, filial relationship with God.

5. Conclusion

My purpose here has been to comment on Rabiipour’s book as a theological text rather than review the literary quality of the book. Nonetheless, I would like to make a few short comments for the person considering reading the book. One thing that is striking about this book is that the main narrative is not really related to his ‘farewell to Islam’. It’s related to the fact that he went AWOL from the Iranian Navy and it caught up to him. This makes the book stand out from other conversion narratives from Islam to Christian, which tend to focus on events leading up to the conversion. Examples of this are *The Imam’s Daughter*, by British-Pakistani Hannah Shah (Zondervan 2010), or *Son of Hamas* (Tyndale 2010) by the Palestinian author Mosab Hassan Yousef, as well as the aforementioned *Into the Light* by Steven Masood, and what is one of the earliest books of the genre, *I Dared to Call Him Father* by Pakistani Bilquis Sheikh¹⁰.

Also, my focus here has not been on examining and analyzing the religious conversion of Rabiipour. There is an ample body of scholarship by now on the topic of why Muslims convert to Christianity¹¹, and religious conversion in general¹². Suffice to say that Rabiipour’s diaspora conversion is really not the main focus of his book. His baptism, for instance, is almost a side-note. And not only is this a diaspora conversion story (and there are many in Iranian Christianity—to the point where there are entire Iranian

¹⁰ This book has been printed and re-printed in many editions throughout the world, but my version is Lincoln, Virginia: Chosen Books, 1978. Also note that *The Imam’s Daughter* has previous versions published in the UK.

¹¹ Many examples could be given, but see Abu Daoud ‘Apostates of Islam’ in *St Francis Magazine* Vol 3:4, March 2008, or Dudley J. Woodberry and Russell Shubin ‘Muslims tell... “Why I Chose Jesus”’ in *Mission Frontiers* March 2001. Also by Woodberry, Shubin and Marks, see ‘Why Muslims Follow Jesus’ in *Christianity Today* October 2007. For a book-length treatment see Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Called from Islam to Christ* (East Sussex: Monarch 1999).

¹² Especially valuable is Rambo Lewis, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press 1993.

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Christians churches¹³), but this is a diaspora theology as well. The author is translating concepts between his two cultures—American Christians on the one hand and Muslims from the Middle East and South Asia on the other. The salvation metaphor—freedom—the author has chosen is also one that he encountered in the diaspora, not one he encountered in his native Iran.

The book is self-published and contains numerous errors in punctuation, grammar and format. For instance, it is a bit alarming to see him include lengthy quotes from Wikipedia! But at least, unlike many students in American universities today, he actually tells you it is a quote. In terms of formatting the books goes into italics periodically with no apparent reason. It is also not clear precisely when he is referencing other sources, which he does from time to time. He does not use footnotes or parenthetical citations which are the norm. So when he is excerpting parts of Kevin Greeson’s *A Complete Muslim*¹⁴ or some section from the website *Answering Islam* it is not always clear where the citation begins or ends. The author has communicated to me that the updated version of his story, titled *Trapped in Iran: The Land of the Ayatollahs* (Xlibris 2010, 278 pages), corrects many of these flaws.

But on the whole Rabiipour has brought a new emphasis to the liberation theology of ex-Muslim Christians. This book is really a theology of freedom (if one knows how to read it). What is freedom? How can we balance freedom and accountability? How are interior freedom and political freedom related? Does God desire us to be free? What do Jesus and Muhammad have to say about freedom? Does the Islamic idea that the shari’a, by making us slaves to God, makes us free, actually succeed? Can a Muslim really look at the life of Muhammad and say that this man stood for freedom? All of these questions are dealt with to some degree or another in *Farewell to Islam*, thus making this book a welcome contribution to the growing body of theology produced by ex-Muslim

¹³ Cf. Duane Alexander Miller ‘Iranian Diaspora Christians in the American Midwest & Scotland: Historical Background, Present Realities & Future Challenges’ in *Global Missiology* Vol 9:2, January 2012 <ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/720/1772>

¹⁴ He quotes the paper ‘A Complete Muslim’ which is taken from Kevin Greeson’s *The Camel: how Muslims are coming to faith in Christ* (Arkadelphia, Arkansas: WIGTake Resources 2007).

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Christians. It should also be of interest to observers of the political and religious discourses of diaspora Iranians.