

**TSSF Study & Prayer**  
**Alnmouth study week : 3 – 7 October 2011**

**Franciscan Approaches to Islam**

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In the 1980s and early 1990s I was involved in anti-racist and interfaith work, and was also in close touch with women members of Edinburgh's Muslim community. These personal contacts helped me to see beyond stereotypes, and to gain some understanding of, and much respect for, the values and beliefs according to which these women lived. They also made me aware of the daily instances of racist language and behaviour that characterised the lives of Muslim women at the time (being told, irrespective of ethnic origin, to 'Go home Paki!' or being spat upon were standard occurrences). Following '9/11', along with many others, I found the huge increase in Islamophobia, and the toleration by parts of society of its vociferous or even violent promotion, most distressing.

Ten years on, and the anniversary of 9/11 has been marked, amongst other ways, by some serious consideration of Christian-Muslim relations, particularly as manifested in the USA. On the negative side, a Channel 4 film<sup>1</sup> traced the perilous course of the efforts of members of New York's Muslim community to build a mosque and Islamic cultural centre a few blocks from 'Ground Zero' and the protests against this, including Pastor Terry Jones' threatened Qur'an burning which gained worldwide publicity. More positively, the latest magazine from the *Sojourners* organisation led by Jim Wallis records the warm co-operation of Heartsong Church in Cordova, Tennessee, and the neighbouring mosque.<sup>2</sup> This began when, on learning that the building opposite had been bought by a mosque, the church members put up a large sign saying 'Heartsong Church welcomes Memphis Islamic Center to the neighborhood'.

And ten years on, now a member of the Third Order, I hope to find that this second, not only non-confrontational, but indeed open and welcoming approach by Christians to Muslims, is consistent with the Franciscan way of following Christ. Francis certainly lived at a time when Christian-Muslim relations were characterised by war and violent campaigns, nevertheless I trust that in this, as in all things, he will be found to have endeavoured to be a true disciple of Christ, whatever the prevailing culture. Furthermore, it seems quite appropriate to look to our 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century founder for guidance on this 21<sup>st</sup> century issue: although the word 'Islamophobia' is a recent coinage,<sup>3</sup> the phenomenon it describes is not at all new; and USA President George Bush chose to use a word from Francis' own time when he initially described his country's response to 9/11 as a 'Crusade'.<sup>4</sup> But I am also a universalist in my approach to other faiths, believing that (in this case) Muslims have found their own way to God and do not need to be converted to Christianity in order to be saved. I am much less sure of finding encouragement from Francis for this stance.

The first ideas for this paper came from reading a book written ‘as a small attempt to counter the culture of Islamophobia’ in the UK, *A Heart Broken Open: Radical faith in an age of fear* by Ray Gaston.<sup>5</sup> The author was in parish ministry in inner-city Leeds for 12 years from the mid 1990s. During this time he engaged honestly and earnestly with Muslims and with Islam, spending time alongside members of the local Muslim community, deepening his understanding of Islam and its followers – and also deepening his understanding of his own Christian faith. Commitment to their Muslim neighbours drew him and other members of the local Christian community into acts of political solidarity with their Muslim sisters and brothers, especially following 9/11, and formed the basis of an effective challenge to Islamophobia in the very part of Leeds used by the 7/7 London bombers for their ‘bomb factory’ in 2005. In addition to Ray Gaston’s own writing, the book also includes responses from some of his partners in dialogue.

The book is an inspiring read, not least in that it is not by watering down his own beliefs that the author draws closer to Muslims and counters prejudice and exclusivity, but by deepening his understanding of Christianity as a radical, life-giving faith. It also felt very Franciscan (more about this later) even before I read the extended reference to Francis’ meeting in 1219 with Sultan Malik al-Kamil, which comes in the final chapter of Ray Gaston’s part of the book.<sup>6</sup>

Motivated first by *A Heart Broken Open*, I then discovered another book aimed at countering Islamophobia, this time in the USA - *In the Spirit of St Francis and the Sultan: Catholics and Muslims Working Together for the Common Good*, by George Dardess & Marvin L. Krier Mich.<sup>7</sup> This book, addressed to grassroots members of both religious traditions, attempts to provide information about Christianity and Islam in an even-handed manner, covering areas of convergence and disagreement, and urging that it is not only desirable but indeed imperative for Muslims and Christians to engage in dialogue and practical action together for justice and peace. Each chapter ends with a number of discussion questions for use in small groups. The meeting between St Francis and the Sultan was chosen by Dardess and Mich as ‘a common symbol of interfaith action that both religious communities could identify with’.<sup>8</sup> In addition to these two books, I am also grateful for and have made substantial use of the 2006 paper entitled *Those Going Among the Saracens* by Hugh Beach TSSF.<sup>9</sup>

In 1219 during the Fifth Crusade, the Crusaders, commanded by Spanish Cardinal Pelagius, were laying siege to Damietta in Egypt and had made more than one assault on the city. Although unsuccessful, these attacks had been sufficient to force the Sultan of Egypt, Malik al-Kamil, to leave Damietta itself and establish his headquarters in a tent a few miles further up the Nile. Francis, who at nearly 40 was of similar age to the Sultan, had arrived on the scene shortly after the second assault in August. Following yet another failed attack in which over 3,400 Crusaders were killed and which ‘Francis could not bear to watch and sent a companion to observe and report’<sup>10</sup> the Sultan made an offer of peace. It was not the first such offer, and was on generous terms, including the restoration of Jerusalem, central Palestine and Galilee, the surrender of 20 Muslim nobles as hostages, and the handing over of a portion of the True Cross; in return Malik al-Kamil

requested a thirty-year truce. As Hugh Beach says, 'of course this offer ought to have been accepted'<sup>11</sup>, but Pelagius was stubborn and refused.

It was at some point after this that Francis sought permission from Pelagius to go, with just one companion, Illuminato of Rieti, to speak with the Sultan in his tent. Pelagius very unwillingly agreed, convinced that Francis and Illuminato were going straight to their deaths, and the two set off across enemy lines. Dardess and Mich are quite certain about Francis' motivation:

His aim was to end the slaughter (and save the Sultan's soul) by converting him to the true faith, Christianity, or, failing that, to die as a martyr. Either outcome would have been glorious, to Francis's way of thinking.<sup>12</sup>

Beach is rather less sure: 'What was Francis really up to? Can he have taken seriously the thought that he would convert the Sultan?'<sup>13</sup> St Bonaventure, in his life of Francis, reverses the emphasis, including the story of Francis' encounter with the Sultan in a chapter headed *De fervore caritatis et desiderio martyrii* 'Concerning the ardour of his love and his longing/ardent desire for martyrdom'.<sup>14</sup> Beach has his doubts about martyrdom. Conceding that it 'would have been regarded in those days as quite correct and indeed highly meritorious', he nevertheless 'cannot believe that Francis would have been so discourteous as to seek audience of the Sultan only to have the man commit deadly sin by killing him.'<sup>15</sup> This argument is persuasive.

Certainly, this could be no ordinary peace overture, since Malik al-Kamil had already offered peace terms and it was Francis' side which had rejected them. The only remaining hope lay in the Sultan's conversion. According to Bonaventure, when Francis and Illuminato finally reached the Sultan's tent,

When that ruler inquired by whom, why, and how they had been sent and how they got there, Christ's servant, Francis, answered with an intrepid heart that he had been sent not by man but by the Most High God in order to point out to him and his people the way of salvation and to announce the Gospel of truth.<sup>16</sup>

Ray Gaston would go further in his speculation:

He wanted to let the Sultan know that the Crusaders did not represent, in their violence and warmongering, the true spirit of Jesus Christ. He wanted to give witness to God's love in Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

This is appealing, but is pure supposition, and as Hugh Beach says, 'I doubt that Francis was a pacifist, even at this stage of his life, or opposed to the use of military force in a good cause.'<sup>18</sup> After all, this was not Francis' first Crusading expedition. That is not to deny that his visit to the Sultan had as a main aim the ending of the bloody warfare in progress, but his initial approach to this, surely, far from distancing himself from his fellow Christians, must have been to try to convert this enemy leader – and his people - to the true faith.

What precisely happened when Francis and Malik al-Kamil met we can never know. There are no eyewitness records surviving, if any existed, and the account of the meeting in Bonaventure's *Legenda Maior Sanctis Francisci* was written some 40 years after the

event. An additional complication, as presented by Dardess and Mich, is ‘growing skepticism’ about Bonaventure’s “official” account’ which presents Francis as a spiritual version of Bishop Pelagius – a Holy Warrior bent on triumphing over the faith of the Other by a material sign of domination. In the case of Francis, the weapon is personal sanctity rather than force of arms, but the hoped-for end result is the same: the Enemy’s abject capitulation.<sup>19</sup>

The Franciscans’ General Chapter in 1266 decided to make the *Legenda Maior Sanctis Francisci*, with its account of Francis representing the forces of Christianity triumphing over Sultan Malik al-Kamil and the Muslim faith, the authorised biography, and to destroy all previous accounts (fortunately, this latter was not entirely successful). Dardess and Mich explain this decision by pointing to the genuine and well-founded fear the Order had at the time of The Inquisition, which would have viewed any opposition to the Crusade as a sign of heresy. They base much of their own conjecture regarding what took place at the historic meeting on accounts which survived the General Chapter’s efforts: Thomas of Celano’s two biographies of Francis and accounts by the Crusade preacher James of Vitry and by the French Crusader who wrote *The Chronicle of Ernoul*.<sup>20</sup> These three still were not eyewitnesses and Dardess and Mich acknowledge that they were all Crusade supporters:

But the fact that they were biased in this way makes more credible the evidence they inadvertently give of a peaceful encounter between Francis and the Sultan, an encounter marked neither by competitive rivalry nor by the eventual triumph of one over the other, but instead by mutual respect and openness.<sup>21</sup>

We should perhaps consider briefly what we know of the Sultan. Despite his reputation amongst the Crusaders as a bloodthirsty leader - hence Pelagius’ expectation that Francis and Illuminato would be slaughtered on sight - his successive attempts to sue for peace on generous terms would suggest otherwise. In fact Malik al-Kamil was a cultured man who had encountered numerous Christians up to this point, many of whom lived safely in Egypt under his rule. He also had a well-attested interest in and respect for the Sufi tradition of Islam and would have been aware of similarities between Sufis and Christian monks. In addition, the Qur’an refers to Christian monks in positive terms:

and thou shalt certainly find those to be nearest in affection to them who say, “We are Christians.” This, because some of them are priests and monks, and because they are free from pride.<sup>22</sup>

Without a doubt, it cannot have been down to Francis alone that, far from killing his Christian visitors, the Sultan welcomed them as guests and spent several days in discussion with Francis.

Dardess and Mich in particular make much of this, because they aim to show that both Christians *and Muslims* can find impetus for engaging in dialogue in following the example of Francis and the Sultan.

We will make sure, however, to invite St. Francis and the Sultan along with us on the journey marked out for us by this book. We will do that by recalling, at each stage of our way, how those two spiritual giants approached similar

challenges in their own time. Our time is different of course. But we can still learn much and draw confidence from their example.<sup>23</sup>

However, my concern here includes only Francis, and so we turn now to examine what further evidence there may be in defining Franciscan approaches to Islam from his encounter with the Sultan.

We do not know for sure in what frame of mind Francis approached Malik al-Kamil, this man who represented not only the enemy and an alien belief system, but also exactly the kind of wealth, power and privilege that Francis had laid aside to follow the Lord Jesus. However, we *do* know that the saint considered all people, indeed all things in creation, to be his brothers and sisters,<sup>24</sup> and we know too that he tried always to follow the teachings of the Christ who said 'love your enemies'.<sup>25</sup> We also have these words from his *Testament* written shortly before his death:

The Lord revealed to me a greeting, as we used to say: "May the Lord give you peace."

If these were Francis' first words to the Sultan, surely that would be significant in setting the tone for their meeting. Whatever the case, Malik al-Kamil detained Francis in discussions over several days, but did not convert to Christianity. On Francis' departure, in addition presumably to yet another peace offer to be conveyed to Pelagius, the Sultan proffered gifts, all of which were turned down according to Bonaventure.

We can learn more, or at least make inferences about Francis' approaches to Islam, from evidence in his writings following the meeting with the Sultan. The first to look at is Chapter 16 of the *Earlier Rule* or *Regula non bullata* completed in 1221, which is entitled 'Those who are going among the Saracens and other non-believers'. Here Francis sets out two conditions under which any brother might be allowed to go amongst Muslims (and other non-Christians): the brother must believe that his undertaking is inspired by God, and he must be approved by his minister as a fit person. But it is the following section, which is of particular interest:

As for the brothers who go, they can live spiritually among [the Saracens and nonbelievers] in two ways. One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject *to every human creature for God's sake* (1 Pet 2:13) and to acknowledge that they are Christians. Another way is to proclaim the word of God when they see that it pleases the Lord, so that they believe in the all-powerful God.....and that they be baptized and become Christians<sup>26</sup>

The first way of living 'spiritually' amongst Muslims is, as Hugh Beach points out, explicitly recognised in Islamic law established by the 9<sup>th</sup> century and still in place as the official position today. Christians and Jews 'are protected if they submit to Islamic domination by a Pact – or *Dhimma* – which imposes discriminatory regulations.'<sup>27</sup>

Ray Gaston takes the fact that Francis outlines this particular way of living amongst Muslims first as giving it precedence:

He prioritises a mission and witness of loving action over direct proselytisation, insisting that they avoid quarrels and disputation with Muslims and work at acts of service and love relating to all human beings. Only after doing this, 'if it pleases God', are they to preach the faith in words.<sup>28</sup>

I think he is mistaken here. *The Rule* expands on the second way, providing a short credal statement which can be used, and encouraging the brothers, with much support from Scripture, to speak forthrightly about their Christian faith and not to be afraid of persecution because 'whoever perseveres to the end will be saved (Mt 24:13).'<sup>29</sup> The emphasis is surely on this second way of openly preaching the Gospel. But the first way is not to be dismissed, since there would be no point in including it unless to give it some authority, as Beach indicates:

So the case was strong for a type of Franciscan life lived among the Saracens and subject to them, but making no secret of its total loyalty to Christ.<sup>30</sup>

All mention of both modes of living amongst Muslims described in *The Earlier Rule* had been removed by the time *The Later Rule* of 1223 was approved by Pope Honorius III, leaving only an instruction that brothers 'who, by divine inspiration, desire to go among the Saracens' should not do so without permission from their ministers provincial.<sup>31</sup> Dardess and Mich may be correct in taking this as evidence that 'even before his death in 1226 Francis's revolutionary openness to the Enemy was being erased',<sup>32</sup> although the case is not proven.

Other writings suggest that Francis' openness to Islam extended to allowing himself to be influenced by it, using insights from Muslim religious practice to enhance his own Christian faith. In his *Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples* we find the following:

And you should manifest such honor to the Lord among the people entrusted to you that every evening an announcement be made by a town crier or some other signal that praise and thanks may be given by all people to the all-powerful Lord God. And if you do not do this, know that you must *render an account* before the Lord your God, Jesus Christ, *on the day of judgment* (cf. Mt 12:36).<sup>33</sup>

It seems not unreasonable to think that this very clear instruction is evidence of Francis having been impressed by the Muslim call to prayer, the *adhan*. He calls for a daily public call to Christian prayer, quite similar to that which he will have heard five times every day in Egypt. Although, as stated earlier, Bonaventure maintained that Francis had refused all the gifts offered by the Sultan, Dardess and Mich state, on what evidence I cannot discover, that he accepted just one thing: a horn used to call the faithful to prayer.<sup>34</sup> They suggest:

Perhaps Francis wanted this tangible symbol of the importance of public, universal prayer in order to make his case for such prayer among Christians.<sup>35</sup>

Another piece of Francis' writing perhaps shows Islamic influence; the well-known prayer, *The Praises of God*, written on the parchment given to Brother Leo, is reminiscent of the Muslim practice of reciting the ninety-nine names of God. Indeed, it has been suggested that this prayer, written shortly after the announcement of a new Crusade, when Francis had retreated to Mt La Verna where he received the stigmata, represents 'an anguished prayer for Sultan al-Malik's well-being as the storms of yet another Crusade began to form around him.'<sup>36</sup> I am not convinced of this – the accompanying blessing appears clearly intended for Brother Leo – but that does not negate the possibility of Islamic influence on the prayer.

The evidence then would suggest that Francis held his Muslim brothers and sisters in respect, and, possibly tired of Crusading, at least from the time of his visit to the Sultan's tent onwards, preferred peaceful engagement to battle. He was eager to bring the Gospel to Muslims, encouraging those brothers whom God inspired to do so, to live and preach amongst them, but also prepared to countenance them submitting to Muslim control and relying solely on the Christian example set by their lives, as long as this was deemed to be the will of God. Francis' writings also support the contention that he admired some Islamic devotional practices to the extent that he adopted them into his own Christian life. We should, of course, beware of reading modern concepts such as 'interfaith dialogue' or 'the counter-cultural' into Francis' thoughts and actions, but in his readiness to challenge by his behaviour the prevailing hostility to Islam and all it represented, he might indeed be said to have embraced *radical faith in an age of fear*, as in the subtitle of Ray Gaston's book.

Gaston was strongly influenced by Islam: learning from it by encounters and friendships with Muslims; keeping the Ramadan fast alongside his friends; reading the Qur'an, often as part of his Christian daily prayer; attending prayers in the mosque. *Islam* means 'submission', and Gaston's growing understanding of his 'Christian *islam*' and how to put it into practice is what gave his book a 'Franciscan' feel. Through Muslim friends he discovered what I learned as a TSSF novice: 'the beautiful path of finding peace in surrendering to God through disciplined practice, the fantastically liberating discipline of prayer brought into the everyday'.<sup>37</sup> Neither is Gaston tempted, as some are these days, to think of watering down the Christian faith in order to avoid offending Muslims. This would certainly have been anathema to Francis.

As a Christian my submission to Allah is through Christ; I seek therefore an *islamic* Christianity. Christ, it appears to me, is the true Muslim, the one who submitted most fully to God's will. As St Paul says, quoting an early Christian hymn:

*He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.*<sup>38</sup>

My three main modern sources all come to the same conclusion: that Franciscans who engage sincerely and respectfully with Muslims, in dialogue and in working together for peace, are following the example of their founder. In addition, as Beach says:

Francis and his brothers.....learned and have shown that the kingdom of God, the kingdom of justice and peace, is not the monopoly of Christians. It is also manifest in the wonderful variety of good and beautiful things which the people of other faiths realize in their daily lives.<sup>39</sup>

But I am still presented with the challenge to my universalism that Francis hoped to convert the Sultan and that, although he authorised a life amongst Muslims which did not involve *preaching* the Gospel, he nevertheless expected those who became a Christian presence in Islamic societies to evangelise by the example they set in their lives. Indeed, in the spirit of Francis, Community Obedience reminds me regularly that the First Aim of the Order to which I now belong is 'To make our Lord known and loved everywhere'. I must acknowledge that the contradiction remains unresolved. Perhaps Gaston can help me here, since it was through the ever closer encounters with Muslims which deepened

his understanding of Islam *and Christianity* that he developed a longing to bring them to the knowledge of Christ. I leave the last word with him:

But I so much also want to share what might be called the *islam* of Christ – the one who in his very being showed how humanity and divinity embrace as one. You want to know God? – look at Jesus, *look* at him, this is how much God loves us: he is not only merciful, slow to anger, but willing to become vulnerable; promises not only to abstain from violence, as in the rainbow story in Genesis, but to receive human violence onto God's very self – to take it, absorb it and transform it through resurrection.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Ground Zero Mosque*, directed by Dan Reed, shown on Channel 4, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2011

<sup>2</sup> 'Peace Be Upon Them', Bob Smietana, *Sojourners Magazine*, September/October 2011 (Vol. 40, No. 9, pp.16f). (Source: <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj1109&article=peace-be-upon-them> )

<sup>3</sup> The earliest reference to the word in print I can find is in a 1985 article by Edward Said: 'Orientalism Reconsidered', London: *Race and Class*, Autumn, 27(2) pp.1-15

<sup>4</sup> 'This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while.' Remarks by George W Bush on the Whitehouse lawn, September 16, 2001 <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html> accessed 23/09/11

<sup>5</sup> *A Heart Broken Open: Radical faith in an age of fear*, Ray Gaston, Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow, 2009. The quotation is from p.19

<sup>6</sup> *A Heart Broken Open*, pp.144f

<sup>7</sup> *In the Spirit of St Francis and the Sultan: Catholics and Muslims Working Together for the Common Good*, George Dardess & Marvin L. Krier Mich, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2011

<sup>8</sup> *In the Spirit of St Francis and the Sultan*, Preface, p.xv

<sup>9</sup> *Those Going Among the Saracens*, Hugh Beach TSSF, June 2006, available as a pdf on the TSSF website <http://www.tssf.org.uk/study-and-prayer-papers/other-papers/223-those-going-among-the-saracens>

<sup>10</sup> Hugh Beach, *Those Going Among the Saracens*, p.7

<sup>11</sup> *Those Going Among the Saracens*, p.8

<sup>12</sup> Dardess & Mich, *In the Spirit of St Francis and the Sultan*, p.17

<sup>13</sup> *Those Going Among the Saracens*, p.8

<sup>14</sup> San Buenventura, *Legenda Maior Sanctis Francisci* <http://www.franciscanos.net/fuentes/legmaior.htm> accessed 26/09/11 via <http://www.franciscan-archive.org/bonaventura/index.html#writings>

<sup>15</sup> *Those Going Among the Saracens*, p.9

<sup>16</sup> Saint Bonaventure, *The Major Legend of Saint Francis* (1260-1263), Chapter 9, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, Eds. Regis J Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellman, William J Short, New City Press, New York & London, Volume II (2000), p.602

<sup>17</sup> *A Heart Broken Open*, p.145

<sup>18</sup> *Those Going Among the Saracens*, p.10

<sup>19</sup> *In the Spirit of St Francis and the Sultan*, pp.132-133

<sup>20</sup> *In the Spirit of St Francis and the Sultan*, p.133

<sup>21</sup> *In the Spirit of St Francis and the Sultan*, pp.153-154

<sup>22</sup> Sura V.85 Translation by J.M. Rodwell in *The Koran*, Everyman's Library, Dent: London, Melbourne & Toronto 1978, p.495

<sup>23</sup> *In the Spirit of St Francis and the Sultan*, pp.19-20

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *The Canticle of Brother Sun*

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 5:44

<sup>26</sup> *The Earlier Rule*, Chapter XVI. 5-7, in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, translation & introduction Regis J Armstrong & Ignatius C Brady, Paulist Press, New York 1982, pp.121-122

<sup>27</sup> *Those Going Among the Saracens*, p.12

<sup>28</sup> *A Heart Broken Open*, p.148



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<sup>29</sup> *The Earlier Rule*, Chapter XVI. 7-22 (quotation from 22), Op.cit. pp.121-122

<sup>30</sup> *Those Going Among the Saracens*, p.13

<sup>31</sup> *The Later Rule*, Chapter XII. 1-2, in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, translation & introduction Regis J Armstrong & Ignatius C Brady, Paulist Press, New York 1982, p.144

<sup>32</sup> Dardess & Mich, *In the Spirit of St Francis and the Sultan*, p.135

<sup>33</sup> *A Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples*, 7-8, in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, translation & introduction Regis J Armstrong & Ignatius C Brady, Paulist Press, New York 1982, p.78

<sup>34</sup> *In the Spirit of St Francis and the Sultan*, p.155

<sup>35</sup> *In the Spirit of St Francis and the Sultan*, p.180

<sup>36</sup> *In the Spirit of St Francis and the Sultan*, p.181, quoting the argument of Franciscan Father Michael Cusato.

<sup>37</sup> *A Heart Broken Open*, p.128

<sup>38</sup> *A Heart Broken Open*, p.92 (quoting Philippians 2.8)

<sup>39</sup> *Those Going Among the Saracens*, p.14

<sup>40</sup> *A Heart Broken Open*, p.129