

CHARLES LE GAI EATON:

THE LAST OF A GROUP OF UNIQUE MEN LEAVES US

Muzaffar Iqbal

By the time I was 15, I had discovered that there was something called ‘philosophy’ and that the word meant ‘love of wisdom’. Wisdom was what I sought, so the satisfaction of my need must lie hidden in these heavy books written by wise men. With a feeling of intense excitement, like an explorer already in sight of the undiscovered land, I ploughed through Descartes, Kant, Hume, Spinoza, Schopenhauer and Bertrand Russell, or else read works which explained their teachings. It was not long before I realized that something was wrong. I might as well have been eating sand as seeking nourishment from this quarter. These men knew nothing. They were only speculating, spinning ideas out of their own poor heads, and anyone can speculate (including a school boy). How could a 15 or 16-year-old have had the impudence to dismiss the whole of Western secular philosophy as worthless? One does not have to be mature to distinguish between what the Qur’an calls *ẓann* (‘opinion’) and true Knowledge. At the same time my mother’s constant insistence that I should take no notice of what others thought or said obliged me to trust my own judgment. Western culture treated these ‘philosophers’ as great men, and students in universities studied their works with respect. But what was that to me?”

Charles Le Gai Eaton (Ḥasan ‘Abdul-Ḥakīm)

With his departure from Earth on February 26, 2010, at the ripe age of 89, the world has lost the last of a group of European converts to Islam who found the spiritual certainty and veritable truth of Islam through the life and works of

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the towering French intellectual René Guénon (1886-1951) and all of whom shared a certain perspective on Western civilization and modernity. But more than any other member of the group—which included Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) and Martin Lings (1909-2005)—it was Charles Le Gai Eaton who witnessed and wrote with intensity and depth on the rapid transmutation of the Muslim world itself, seen from the perspective of one who embraced Islam only to find out Muslims themselves are fast abandoning the civilization which appeared so enchanting to him. This may have produced disillusionment in less solidly rooted individuals, but for Gai Eaton it became a lifelong vocation to study the ways in which modern Western civilization was making its way into the very heart of Islam. He was uniquely suited to explore, understand, and articulate the rapidly changing social and cultural situation of the Muslim world; Allah had placed him on Earth at geographical locations which provided ideal observation posts, a temporal span (1921-2010) during which fundamental changes took place in the makeup of the Muslim world, and a long life filled with travels which took him to many corners of the world.

A Charterhouse and Cambridge-educated man of passion, Eaton entered Islam in 1951 and went through many turbulent years before finding his way into the more tranquil realms of the spirit from where he would contemplate the state of the world with ever more clarity and without the fanning winds of his youth. He worked as a diplomat, wrote seven books, and served for 22 years at the Islamic Cultural Centre, Regent's Park Mosque, witnessing the radicalization of many younger members of the congregation and turbulent political and military events which ripped apart the British Muslim community on issues of vital importance to the larger Umma.

For many Western converts to Islam, the experience of joining the Umma has been difficult. On the one hand, they are often welcomed with exceptional hospitality; on the other, they are expected to fit a certain model which leaves little room for any critique of what they see in the lives of their new brethren in faith. Gai Eaton refused to fill this role and hence his candid observations were not always welcomed. But this did not stop him from eloquently articulating what he experienced and understood, fully realizing the nature of the time in which he lived as filled with signs of the end of time.

Gai Eaton felt the need to write about Islam for Westerners, because, for the most part, works written by Muslims (that is, those born into Muslim homes) and “educated in the modern educational machine, [especially those] written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, cannot now be read without embarrassment.” He described their authors as the “Uncle Toms” of Islam, noting that their apologetic ‘defense’ of Islam depended on demonstrating its congruence with “the best of contemporary fashions of thought” and that it “accorded perfectly with the moral and philosophical norms of European

civilization.” Rarely, however, did such authors subject Western tradition itself to a critical gaze. “The idea that the civilization they admired so blindly might be open to radical criticism in terms of Islamic norms scarcely crossed their minds” (*Islam and the Destiny of Man*, p. 12). Gai Eaton’s published interventions into such a colonized intellectual climate thus provided breaths of fresh air, opening the possibilities for critique, thought, and spiritual affirmation.

Islam and the Destiny of Man (1985) gave him numerous opportunities to speak to Muslim audiences around the world (including UK, America, Pakistan, Peru). His speaking style was both warm and personal, with a touch of the drama for which he had received professional training. He could speak at length and in depth on a range of topics dealing with various aspects of Islam, modernity, and fine arts. He absorbed the teachings and perspectives of the senior members of the Guénonian group and often made references to the works of Schuon and Lings, but his style was always his own. Compared to the other members of the group, he used a much simpler language and syntax, played more attention to the ordinary reader and used a bit of drama to captivate his audience. The Introduction to his *King of the Castle: Choice and Responsibility in the Modern World* (Islamic Texts Society, 1999) is a typical example of his ability to immediately capture the attention of the reader:

If, by some strange device, a man of our century could step backwards in time and mix with the people of a distant age he would have good cause to doubt either their sanity or his own. Mountains, forests and the blue sky would look familiar enough, but they would not be seen by the people around him in the way he saw them. Their physical features might be the same, but their meaning would be different. (p. 7)

Capturing his readership with this introductory paragraph, Eaton unmasked many facets of modernity in the light of traditional wisdom and understanding of who we are, what is our role in this world, and where we are at present in reference to the long history of human existence on earth. The book was immediately hailed as a major work; John Seymour was so moved by the book that he wrote: “Reading this book enormously influenced me. There are two reasons for this. One was that what the man said was so obviously right. The other was that Eaton is, as Cobbett was, a master of the English language. His writing is direct, elegant, but most of all devastatingly persuasive.”

Eaton served the dual function of being an eloquent expositor of Islam for the Westerner and an eye-opener for Muslims living in the traditional lands of Islam as well as in the West, both by showing them the deeper malaise of the civilization they aped and by providing them insights into their own civilization they are rapidly forgetting. This was not an easy task, as he knew well.

All of his books are series of essays, reflecting, first and foremost, his own

spiritual journey as he moved deeper and deeper into the spiritual realms of Islam, and the times in which lived. Almost all chapters of each of his book open with a thought, event, or an anecdote pulsating with immediacy and then he gently takes the reader to the deeper waters. This typical style, along with the clarity of message, made his books readily accessible to an average reader without diluting the genuine effort to present deeper realities of life and living.

Eaton left behind two sons and two daughters as well as his publications, which continue to illuminate the contemporary world in their clarity of vision. His publications bring into ordinary lives the blessings of the world beyond by opening small windows. It would not be wrong to say that all of his books read like a travelogue describing his spiritual journey and inviting readers to join him in a voyage of self-discovery in the light of traditional wisdom.

In addition to his well-known *Islam and the Destiny of Man*, Gai Eaton's works include *The Richest Vein: Eastern Tradition and Modern Thought*; *King of the Castle: Choice and Responsibility in the Modern World*; *Remembering God: Reflections on Islam*; and the 2009 *A Bad Beginning and the Path to Islam*. His more personal writings (especially his last work) furnish revealing personal details of a life lived with passion, grace, and striving for an ever-higher spiritual station.