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## GLASWEGIAN AUTHOR BRINGS HIS 15-YEAR FATWA TO BOOK

THE FULL INTERVIEW - BY GILLIAN BOWDITCH

Photo: Robert Kerr

*... what people believe to be in the Quran and what it actually says are two different things.* PAIGHAM MUSTAFA

Paigham Mustafa may be a publisher but he is no liberal member of the glitterati. Sipping a glass of water in a cafe in Dundee, this slightly built, erudite 58-year-old would be out of place in the literary salons presided over by Sir Salman Rushdie and his acolytes. But Mustafa knows what it feels like to be Rushdie. He is the only person in Britain living under a fatwa.

The fatwa — in principle an Islamic legal opinion or interpretation but in reality often a damning, sometimes deadly, denunciation — was issued in February 2001 after Mustafa, then the owner of a small print company that published Asian magazines, incurred the wrath of senior Muslim clerics.

His “crime” was to write a series of articles claiming that practices such as the death penalty, stoning for adultery, and female genital mutilation — all of which are carried out in some Muslim countries — had no basis in the Koran. In one article, he questioned claims by some Muslim preachers that the majority of people in hell would be women.

As a result, the imams of eight Glasgow mosques, under the auspices of the controversial Glasgow Central Mosque, gathered to denounce him in the strongest terms. In a chilling echo of Rushdie’s book *The Satanic Verses*, where censure in a fatwa in 1989 by the Ayatollah Khomeini forced Rushdie into hiding for

a decade, the imams accused Mustafa of “satanic thoughts”.

While they stopped short of openly calling for his murder, they accused him of seeking to “damage and destroy the doctrines of Islam” and of “deviating innocent, young Muslims by injecting poison” into their minds. In addition, Mustafa was accused of “sedition”, “evil”, “corruption”, “dissension” and “incitement to temptation”.

The edict, issued on the official headed paper of Glasgow Central Mosque and distributed in thousands of leaflets around Glasgow, called on “every Muslim . . . to fulfil their duty to protect their faith, children and the faithful followers of Muhammad”. The fatwa called on Muslims to “terminate these elements and to protect the youth from this temptation”, and promised rewards “from Allah now and hereafter”.

In fear for his life and concerned for the safety of his wife and three children, Mustafa went to ground but he did not stop studying the original texts of the Koran. Now he is putting his head above the parapet with the publication of a new book, *The Quran: God’s Message to Mankind*, published by Xeitre-Signat, his own imprint. It is, he says, an exegesis for the 21st century.

In reality, it challenges the imams and their interpretation of the Koran head on. Mustafa’s thesis is an extension of

his original argument; that what people believe to be in the Koran and what it actually says are two different things. The laws and traditions — from rules about food and dress, to the treatment of women and punishment for transgressions — which have grown up around Islam have no basis in the original Koran, he argues. Instead, the peaceful and inclusive message of the original text has been hijacked over the centuries by powerful religious leaders for their own ends.

“When you read the Koran — if you go back to the original words and concepts — it is very inclusive, liberal and tolerant,” he says. “At that time there were Jews and Christians living in Arabia, and when Islam expanded it didn’t expand with any violence. All these people are called ‘believers’ in the Koran. It was a very inclusive society. There are no rituals or traditions in the Koran, only values.”

But Mustafa’s new exposition of the Koran is likely to be seen as heretical by many traditional Muslims. He says he cannot remember a time when Islam was so separate, intolerant and exclusive as it is now. “Generally, the communities were a lot closer and more accepting than they are now,” he says of his childhood in Glasgow.

“The things which define Muslims are now their dress and their food and the

rituals. None of these are in the Koran. It's happened because the people who have the power and authority have wanted this to happen. It strengthens their position. They have more control over people."

When the original fatwa was issued 15 years ago, Mustafa was on holiday in Malaysia with his wife. "It came out of the blue," he says.

"A friend phoned me to say there were lots of leaflets about me being distributed by the Glasgow mosques. He faxed one to me. It was in Urdu. I translated it into English and it was actually a fatwa. All the imams had come together and issued it. They compared me to Salman Rushdie. It was very frightening. There were lots of accusations. I was very shocked. This was something that I had never expected."

Mustafa contacted Strathclyde police but, to his surprise, he was initially told that there was little the force could do. His MP Des Browne, now Lord Browne, was a great help and without his intervention things might have been much worse. Even so, it was a stressful time.

"I just withdrew," he says. "I didn't go out. The three children were quite young. I was concerned for them. The children were confused, which is why I didn't take it any further. I said to Des Browne that I didn't want any escalation. You have to suddenly withdraw from your own community. It was indescribable, really."

The death of his father a few weeks after the fatwa was issued brought the enormity of his ostracism home to him. Mustafa was getting ready to go to the mosque for the funeral when there was a phone call to warn him off. If he attended there would be trouble, he was warned, and so he was forced to stay away.

"That was the worst thing that happened," he says. "But it strengthened my resolve. I felt there must be something in what I was discovering. Then I decided to do further research."

In his book, the result of a lifetime's study of the Koran, Mustafa poses the question: "If Islam is true, why then are Muslims in such a despicable state?", adding that "The Muslim countries are some of the least developed, the poorest, the most corrupt and the most tyrannised in the world."

He calls on "Muslims, intellectuals and all people who want a better world to critically analyse and evaluate the whole of the 'Islamic' tradition, not only from the last 200 years but even the millennium before that. And in this evaluation there must be no place for sentiments and prejudice".

His is the kind of liberal, moderate Muslim voice politicians and faith leaders want to hear more of and he is speaking to several government agencies about the rise of extremism.

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**The message of the Koran has been totally skewed."**

Why are so few educated, liberal Muslims speaking out about the misogyny and barbarism of the minority?

"Because they are frightened," he says, simply. Why is he not frightened?

"I'm not saying I'm not," he says. "It is serious stuff. All the things that have happened recently — the murder of Asad Shah and the imam who was killed in England — do cross my mind. But I have been doing the work for so long and I know the truth. I know what I believe in. I am a believer and a humanitarian. I believe in the word of the Koran. This has been distorted in order to enforce views which are detrimental to society."

He sees the rise of Isis and the terrorist attacks in France and other places as political acts supported by religious ideology. "They are not backed up in the Koran but they are backed up by the hadith [supplementary reports on the words, actions or life of the prophet Muhammad] traditions, which are supported by all the mosques in the UK."

Mustafa's parents came to Britain from Pakistan and assimilated easily into life here. The burqa his mother wore when she went outside her village came with her, but she never wore it once she set foot in the UK.

He believes the Muslim diaspora in Europe have since adopted more segregated and stricter approaches than the original communities they hail from, in part to give them a greater sense of identity.

These beliefs have been reinforced by the religious hierarchy, and are indoctrinated into the youth in evening classes and weekend school, he argues. "We don't eat their food, we don't dress like them and we don't speak like them," he says of many modern Muslims. "This 'them and us' situation is being artificially created and it is very dangerous, but it is difficult for people to go against the teaching of the mosques. This isn't just about culture; it's about money as well. The mosques are generating a lot of money and there is not much transparency."

This weekend he will send copies of his new book to the Prince of Wales, the Archbishop of Canterbury and oth-

er faith leaders. He is keen to debate his findings with imams and academics in a series of public events around the country, irrespective of his own personal safety. It's one of the reasons he decided not to publish under a pseudonym and why he is willing to be photographed. It seems idealistic, given the fact that, despite Browne's best efforts, the fatwa has never been lifted.

"It's not idealistic, it's realistic," he says. "I would welcome public debate. Then if I am wrong, they can show in public that I am wrong. But if I am right, they have to accept it. What I am doing is far more important than the fatwa. I hope I don't have to go into hiding. If these people are speaking the truth, they should have no concerns about debating publicly. Nothing is more powerful than the Koran. If they threaten me, then it shows there is weakness in their argument. The message of the Koran has been totally skewed."

He says there is an underground network of Muslims globally who share his views and back his work. "There are a lot of people out there who have not spoken out because to take the first step is precarious," he says. "People will start to speak out."

He doesn't want to talk about his personal safety or the precautions he is taking. His children are grown up and are supportive, as is his wife. But they are understandably concerned. The forces he is up against are powerful and he does not sugar-coat his remarks.

"They use fear of popular wrath to invoke fear in an attempt to muzzle any criticism and any questions about traditionally held beliefs," he says. "They have the deluded self-importance to believe that they and only that the priestly class are fit to handle all matters of belief — that they are the inheritors of the Islamic mission and should hold a monopoly on all such matters."

It is impossible not to worry for him. "Even if you are in a minority of one, the truth is still the truth," he says. "I have spent all my life on this. I have given it everything."

But it is a David and Goliath situation, I blurt out, mixing my religious metaphors.

"And looked what happened to him," he replies.

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**God's Message to Mankind**  
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