# How do you love your enemy when your enemy is your family?

Jonny Rashid

I grew up in an Egyptian American household in Central Pennsylvania. I was raised as a fundamentalist Christian, and my family attended the largely white Evangelical Free Church in town. I was taught to have a deep reverence for the Bible, particularly. My family had weekly Bible studies, and we held that the Bible was so holy, we could never even place it on the ground. In my reflection on this aspect of the Christian holy text, I wondered how much conservative Muslims' respect for the Qur'an influenced my family's respect for the Bible. We honored it as if it were a god unto itself, and while my views of the Bible—and, frankly, the rest of the world—have shifted dramatically away from my family's, I credit my family with planting a seed of faith that has blossomed into my own calling and vocation as a Mennonite pastor today.

When I was ordained in Mennonite Church USA, I remarked that I was not the pastor my parents expected me to be. I departed from their understanding of the Bible, their fundamentalist theology, and their political worldview. What's more, I'm queer and divorced, both of which, to put it mildly, were not pathways my parents expected, or honestly hoped, for me. So, despite not being the pastor they expected me to be, I am still proud to be the one they raised.

Mom and Dad live in the same world that I live in and they witness the same current events that I do. And yet, they see them from a decidedly different perspective. When I was younger and trying to find my way, I differentiated myself from them by expressing my alternative viewpoints to the world. I did this to become my own person, but it naturally resulted in a lot of emotional tension in my family. I can't quite tell you if I was trying to share my point of view or if I was trying to share that I was growing up and becoming my own person. Were we having a political debate, or was politics merely the playing field upon which we were hashing out our changing relationships? I suspect it was a bit of both.

These days, I have favored not engaging in political or religious discussion with my family. It's become far too painful for me personally because my sexuality, part of my very identity and body, is a discussion point. I don't want my body to be reduced to a discussion subject. Additionally, the existential issues that we face in our society are far too costly for me to simply debate them. The great cost of this boundary is intimacy. But the cost of not having a boundary is far greater: my mental health.

The prevailing nonviolent theory suggests that empathy alone is the key to lessening and dampening our polarization.[1] The argument suggests we are polarized because we cannot see each other, cannot empathize with one another, and have forgotten to treat one another as human beings. Politics, to some, has become too important and has eclipsed our very humanity. My experience suggests the opposite. It is not that politics has eclipsed our humanity in its importance, but rather, that politics is embodied. So our discussions have moved from ones about policy and theology to ones about people and their oppression.

The modern far-right has argued that empathy is so destructive, it has caused us moral ambiguity that is threatening the values our society is built upon. Put another way, some might say that it results in moral decay. While it is ludicrous to suggest empathy is sinful, I do not think it is a panacea to our polarized society. However, empathy does have a role, perhaps not in political action, but in making it possible for me to continue to relate to and, as our Lord commands, love my enemies.

It might feel dramatic to name my immediate family as enemies, but given their hostility toward my sexuality, for starters, naming them as enemies moves me to offer them empathy. How could they see the world so categorically differently than I do? How could they elect their ideological position over my very humanity? To begin answering those seemingly unanswerable questions, I want to draw upon Elaine Enns and Ched Myers's notion of "landlines, bloodlines, and songlines."[2] Landlines are where we walk to and from, referring to our geography and land. Bloodlines are whom we walk with, our family and our ancestors. Songlines are the cultural and spiritual communities and traditions that have shaped us.

Prior to knowing these terms, it was nonetheless precisely this framework that allowed me to grow in my understanding of my parents' theological and political formation. Not only did it help me empathize with my family, but it also helped me understand myself and how I was formed theologically and politically.

My parents grew up in Egypt, my father in Upper Egypt and my mother in the Shubra neighborhood in Cairo. My paternal grandfather was a Protestant pastor, and his ministry led him to Shubra. It was at his church where they met. They essentially grew up together, both being raised in the Protestant tradition—which is notable, because while Egypt's Christian population is fairly large compared to its neighbors, it is largely Coptic, not

1 Kazu Haga, *Healing Resistance: A Radically Different Response to Harm* (Parallax Press, 2020). Haga's book has many arguments favoring nonviolence, but central to his thesis is that enemy empathy is tantamount to their transformation.

2 Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Cascade Books, 2021).

Protestant. My parents, in my view, collected the faith that was brought to Egypt via missionaries and colonization. They were not part of the ancient Coptic church, but rather the relatively recently introduced Protestant one.

So, my parents grew up in a Protestant church and gravitated toward Evangelicalism in Egypt. The reason I name them as fundamentalists is because I grew up with hard and fast rules about the Bible, morality, and "the world." We were never to engage in worldly activities that could pollute our souls. Harry Potter was strictly forbidden, and I remember having to sell my Pokémon cards (though I still play, and my mom knows it!). Their religious formation is something of their *songline*. It empowered and sustained them through the persecution they faced. It also intersects with their *landline*, because they developed and held their faith because of Western influence. And it is further connected with their *bloodline*, because it was passed on to them from their parents, and specifically from my paternal grandfather.

In a Muslim-majority country, my parents felt like they needed to hide their faith or face genuine prejudice. I've experienced this very prejudice in my brief visits to Egypt. So, because of their witness and my own lived experience, I believe their experience. In the land they called home, they couldn't be themselves. Sadly, that does not give them empathy for me as a queer pastor, but it does help me to understand them.

My dad's family, and later my mom's family, immigrated to the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s. My parents followed them, not just to be close to family, but also to be in the mythical Land of the Free. They believed, and to a degree this is true, that they would experience more religious liberty in the United States. I know that they did, but from my perspective it was less because of the pluralism of the US, and far more because for the first time in their lives they were part of the religious majority, instead of a minority. Surely their immigration status, their culture, and their language made them stand out.

They were in a tricky predicament as migrants. They wanted to protect themselves and their children from the so-called evils of secular American culture, but they also wanted to assimilate to that very culture to guard against the prejudice that many migrants and people of color feel.

Their bloodline brought their faith, their landline brought them persecution, and their songline brought them hope in the form of the American Evangelical church. It was within a moderately sized Evangelical Free Church in Lebanon, PA, the place my dad's job ultimately landed us, that they found relief, respite, and home. As a result of the welcome they received from American Evangelical culture, they also gravitated toward political conservatism, a key project of the Evangelical church. Migrating to the United States in the 1980s made them comfortable with the conservative politics of Ronald Reagan, a darling of Evangelicals and one who positioned the

United States against the majority-Muslim countries of the Middle East. For them, because Reagan and Republicans made Muslims into their enemies, they became their friends, so to speak. They adopted Evangelical politics as a way of surviving their new environment, and to this day they've followed that songline into support for the current president, Donald Trump. The safety they experienced in this cultural milieu caused them to support many conservative talking points, including (and I will get into this more later) Christian Zionism and Christian dispensationalism. The safety they found in the church made them supporters of Israel, whose "restoration" would expedite the return of Jesus.

It may be shocking to white liberals that a family of Arab migrants would support Donald Trump—and it remains shocking to me—but given their histories and experiences, it makes some sense. It is through understanding the experiences that formed them that I am able to empathize with them and love them. Stretching myself toward empathy is how I avoid reducing them to merely my oppressors, but rather view them as victims of their own oppression looking for an escape. Have they found it in Trumpian Christian nationalism? Hardly, in my opinion, but decidedly so in theirs.

As I stated above, they planted in me the seeds of my own faith. I grew up with an appreciation of the Bible and a love for the church. The safety they found in that Evangelical Free Church in Lebanon County was the safety that I also enjoyed. Compared to the public school I attended, that church community was far less prejudiced and racist. I felt a sense of belonging there, despite feeling some shame about my skin color, my family's accent, and even how warmly spiced our food was (we didn't smell like cumin, but we sure looked like we did).

I played my part in my family and was an avid church attendee and a fixture in the youth group. I enjoyed it so much that I became a student leader of the youth group and developed a close relationship with my conservative, yet understanding, youth pastor. To this day, I mark some of the friends I made there as my closest and dearest. I am extremely grateful for the seed of faith that my parents gave me, and the lifelong friendships that it helped blossom.

It wasn't paradise, but it was very welcoming to me. I found a sense of love and family in that church. But things started to go awry after the September 11 attacks. My family experienced fear after learning that it was Arab attackers who were responsible—my parents because it felt like the prejudice they had escaped was coming for them across the Atlantic Ocean, and me because I was fearful of the racism and xenophobia that would impact me. And it surely did. I was asked if we lived in a pyramid, classmates compared my likeness to that of Osama bin Laden, and, of course, I heard epithets too.

My bloodline brought me my faith and my ethnicity. My faith brought me the comfort of the kind but not particularly inclusive Evangelical Free

Church, and my ethnicity brought me the prejudice that I experienced as the Global War on Terrorism started. It wasn't just my ethnicity that informed how I saw the post-9/11 world, but also my faith (and admittedly some politically charged punk rock). Coupled with my experience of racism, it was my fidelity to Christianity and to the teachings of Jesus (which I would later learn aren't limited to the four Gospels, but rather span the whole Bible) that positioned me to protest the very wars my parents supported and to oppose the administration (and the political party) that was causing them.

The issue I faced in that Evangelical church was that nearly everyone in it had the same theology and politics as my parents. I described my understanding of the war to the youth pastor, and though he disagreed with me, he allowed me to express my own viewpoints. My disdain for the war also led me toward more radical politics, asking questions about the US economic form, as well as other social issues including anti-racism and LGBT+ inclusion. Little did I know that it was also my sexuality that helped burgeon in me a passion for queer folks—I was not out yet.

But despite the support of my loving youth pastor, I felt entirely isolated in my faith, which I had already begun deconstructing. Though my aforementioned dear friends would deconstruct their Evangelical faith in a similar way, I did so a few years before them, and felt the additional isolation.

A few summers after 9/11, I moved to my beloved Philadelphia to attend Temple University and study journalism, political science, and eventually education. I wasn't sure what would happen to my faith; I didn't even know I *could* protest wars and the Bush administration and still call myself a Christian. The campus Christian groups and the local Presbyterian Church in America church didn't help matters either, because I found more of the same in them. My bloodline and landlines were conflicting with what I felt was my songline. I found much deeper community and solidarity with left-wing campus groups than with Christian ones. And the Christian community I tried to form made me feel more alone than I did before.

On a fateful Sunday, after seeing a flyer for a show at a certain Anabaptist church, my dormmate invited me and some friends to check it out. It felt far away (we didn't use the bus, and it took a subway transfer to get there). But we sojourned to that neighborhood, one that has since become extremely gentrified. When I walked in, I saw a bumper sticker on the side of a computer monitor that declared: "War in Iraq? NO!" I felt, for the first time in a long time, the possibility of a new home—a new songline, if you will.

While the community was predominantly white, I made a home with them under the guidance of the congregational pastor. It was he who saw something in me, specifically the ability to lead and communicate, that ultimately led me to plant a church with that community and find a place in the world of Anabaptism. For the first time in my life, my landline (an Egyptian American), my bloodline (a Christian American), and my songline

(a person of faith with a penchant for social justice) found their intersection. This journey would eventually lead me to become a pastor in Mennonite Church USA, where I currently find myself.

This intersection was made even more powerful by Mennonite Church USA's commitment and passion for justice in Palestine, another place where my bloodline, landline, and songlines intersected.[3] It wasn't just my Christian conviction for peace that led me to advocate for Palestine; it was also my heritage as an Arab American, my bloodline. In that very advocacy I found my songline again, an apropos term considering that many of the actions I've used to protest the genocide and imposed famine in Gaza have been done through song and melody.

The place I found is far from perfect, and though I see very little fault in my beloved West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship, the limitations of a predominantly white church have haunted me. Additionally, I am further disenchanted because my own identities, as a queer person and as a brown person, are often at odds in Mennonite circles. I hear too often that the interests of queer people are different than the interests of brown people. But I am a living testament to the fact that this binary is utterly false. And so I will continue to share my story in hopes of softening those hard and painful divisions.

Ultimately, it was my faith and my social position as an ethnic minority that shaped my politics and my theology. Similarly, it was their faith and social position as religious minorities that shaped my parents' politics and theology. Our lines' concentric circles landed us in decidedly different places, and while that is deeply painful for me, I have moved from seeing our differences purely as a matter of hatred and prejudice to seeing them as the result of our lived experiences. I naturally wish for a sense of family with my blood relatives, and I am saddened it is not there. But the work of God through our histories is long, and there may be hope yet for our future. In the meantime, I am grateful to trace our lineages to a greater understanding of both myself and them. While it doesn't heal all the wounds I have, it softens my pain and keeps it from turning into an anger that might result in total detachment. To my family, I see you. And I hope you can grow to see me, too.

## About the author

Jonny Rashid serves as pastor for West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship. He serves on Mennonite Action's national team, and he is on the steering committee for the Philadelphia Coalition for Affordable Communities and the Philadelphia Alliance for Peace and Justice for Palestinians. He writes for *Anabaptist World*, wrote *Jesus Takes a Side: Embracing the Political Demands of the Gospel* (MennoMedia, 2022), and is a DMin student at Eastern Mennonite University.

3 Mennonite Church USA, "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine:A Resolution for Mennonite Church USA" (August 2020), https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/IP-Resolution.pdf.