

Dr Taj Hargey – who was named after the Taj Mahal – pictured in the Ashmolean Museum's Islamic gallery

*Photograph:
Damian Halliwell*



Dr Taj Hargey was born in South Africa in 1955. Under the apartheid regime he was categorised as ‘Cape Malay’, and would be racially labelled in his words, “from the womb to the tomb”.

Dr Hargey learned the hard way that it was dangerous and seemingly futile to openly question the consequences of his designated station in life – and at the time did not think that institutionalised apartheid would end in his lifetime.

Few non-whites were allowed passports, so the story of his eventual escape from South Africa to study in Egypt is an inspiring one. He would go on to become the first South African Muslim to obtain a DPhil at Oxford.

Now living and working in the university city, his latest struggle against closed minds and social injustice requires further courage.

Even before the awful events of 9/11, Dr Hargey was acutely aware that British Muslims were often living disparate, parallel and self-segregated lives in this country.

Dr Hargey decided to leave his comfortable life as an historian and academic to become the Imam and theologian of the most enlightened Islamic congregation in the UK.

He was determined to teach young British Muslims (and their parents) that a modern progressive perspective is in accordance with Islam’s transcendent text, the Qur’an. To this end, he founded the Muslim Educational Centre of Oxford (MECO).

Virtually alone among Britain’s Muslim leaders, he objects to the burka or niqab being described as a ‘religious’ symbol.

As an Imam, Dr Hargey soon came across a problem facing many young Muslims who, like himself, wish to have choice in how they lead their lives.

No British-based Imam would perform a marriage ceremony for a Muslim woman who wished to marry outside the faith. They will sometimes marry a Muslim man to a non-Muslim woman, but not the other way around.

Dr Hargey is the only Imam in Britain who presides over such interfaith marriages and his services are much in demand.

He also made history when he permitted Muslim women to lead the Friday congregational prayers and founded the Oxford Muslim Music Festival, now in its tenth year.

Virtually alone among Britain’s Muslim leaders, he objects to the burka or niqab being described as a ‘religious’ symbol.

He said: “It is a cultural relic from patriarchal pre-Islamic times invented to reinforce masculine control over women and is not an Islamic obligation.”

Opposing entrenched dogmas and social conventions can be risky, but Dr Hargey is no stranger to death threats and slanderous opposition.

I wondered what inspirational object, work of art or book an Imam would want to take to our island of Oxtopia. I promised copies of the



In October 2010, Dr Taj Hargey became the first Muslim to preach at Oxford’s Pembroke College in its 500-year history

Photograph: Andrew Walmsley

Challenging convention

Sylvia Vetta talks to the progressive theologian and liberal Imam Dr Taj Hargey, director of the Muslim Educational Centre of Oxford

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In 2009, Dr Hargey performed a muslim wedding ceremony for Sana Majeed McMillion and her husband, Andrew McMillion, who were unable to find an Imam who would do the job in Norway where they live

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world's holy books would already be there.

Dr Hargey said: "I was born in Cape Town, the eldest of eight children. My mother Zaynab was illiterate. My father, Sharif, was descended from indentured labour brought from South East Asia to South Africa by the Dutch in the late 17th century. He only had four years of schooling and was forced to become a shop assistant.

"We were poor, but despite our poverty I was never one to just do as I was told. At age three, I hung on to the bumper of a car that was taking my father and his friends to a meeting. They only discovered my unwanted presence when they were stopped by the traffic police! I was unceremoniously returned home by my indignant father.

"When I was five, I annoyed my mother one day and she said 'Go away'. I went into the kitchen, picked up a saucepan and ran out of the house. I thought that with the saucepan, I could look after myself, boil water, make a cup of tea and cook something for myself.

"I was found by an old friend of the family five miles from home. He asked me what I was doing and, when I said 'leaving home'. He took me, kicking and screaming, back to my mother.

Dr Hargey soon learned that there were other prohibitions in apartheid South Africa.

He said: "The safe beaches of Cape Town were for whites only and the ones for non-whites were dangerous so I did not learn to swim as a child. Once while wandering outside my segregated neighbourhood, I came across a public gardens with a playground. I had just reached the slide when I was shouted at and thrown out. 'Can't you read?' they said. 'This park is only for whites only.'"

Cape Malay was a sub-group of the coloured category under apartheid legitimisation so Dr Hargey went to a school exclusively for 'coloureds'.

Within the racist hierarchy, he would receive a slightly better education than black children – assigned to Bantu schools – but having ideas of your own was perilous.

He recalled: "At primary school, I came up with an ingenious solution not only to the playground/beach problem but also to apartheid. If all kids were born coffee-coloured they could all be equal and could then play together and there would be no need for any apartheid.

"My teachers demanded to know where I had got such radical ideas, called me 'communist' and beat me. In reality, they were scared. The South African secret police was always on the lookout for 'communists' and other so-called subversives.

"I had a passionate desire to learn about the world. I would draw colourful maps of the world, depicting each country and capital and dreamed of visiting these places one day. I would perhaps like a world map on the island."

Aged 15, Dr Hargey had his first opportunity to leave the confines of Cape Town.

"I had a better-off uncle who, seeing that I was bright, supported me through school. He helped my father buy me a Yamaha moped which was my way to autonomy. I drove this 50cc bike from Durban to Cape Town, a journey of more than 1,000 miles. It whetted my desire to see the world.

Thanks to his uncle, Dr Hargey was able to study and eventually apply for university.

He said "I was the first in the family to go to secondary school and the first to study A Levels. Because of my race, the only choice available of higher education to me was between the designated Coloured or Asian University.

"I chose the latter since it was in Durban. I read History and Oriental Studies with minors in Arabic and Comparative Religion. The

French petrol company Total gave me a scholarship for my final two years. I am still grateful – and always fill up when I pass a Total station!

"I achieved the highest marks possible but, when I graduated, my only option, apart from blue-collar jobs, was to become a teacher. So I was eager to leave South Africa and study further but it was almost impossible for non-whites to get a passport. I knew the government thought that once out of the country we would join the banned ANC and return to fight white racism.

"I carefully prepared the ground for my escape by nurturing and persuading one of my Afrikaner professors that I would make 'a good ambassador' for South Africa. Shortly before obtaining my undergraduate degree, he wrote a letter supporting my application for a passport.

"In the meantime, I applied for admission to several African universities but the only reply I received was from the American University in Cairo. It was a rejection of my application to read management studies.

"But I had not applied to study management but Middle East Studies. So I used the original letter as a means of escaping South Africa. I covered up and re-typed the word 'reject' with 'accept', photocopied it and I folded it along the line so they would not identify the forgery.

"I showed my uncle my newly-acquired passport and the forged letter saying I need a ticket to Egypt and he kindly paid for one. In those days as a result of apartheid, there were no direct flights to Egypt, so I flew via Greece. That was the first time I met white people on an equal basis.

"In the hotel in Athens, I found myself having a meal in the dining room alongside white people for the very first time and was so

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nervous I sent a potato flying across the room when I tried to cut it.

"My luck stayed with me because I arrived in Egypt just three days before they banned entry, because of the anti-apartheid sanctions, to anyone with a South African passport," Dr Hargey said.

"I went to the American University and showed them the letter of rejection explaining that I had not applied for management studies but Middle Eastern studies, adding 'I have just escaped from apartheid and will not be going back and need your help'.

"The head of department, Professor William Millward was interested in my story and went out of his way to arrange a scholarship so that I could study Islamic history and theology. My ambition was to obtain a doctorate at either Harvard or Oxford as I was determined to study only at the most prestigious university in the world, something that was denied to me in my native South Africa.

"It so happened that Albert Hourani, the legendary Arab historian at Oxford, visited Cairo to give a lecture and he said: 'Oxford will accept you but cannot fund you'. He suggested that I try for a Rhodes, which meant returning to South Africa.

"The interviewing panel of five were all white. Unknown to me, the chairman of the panel was also the president of the South African Zionist Federation. He asked me about Palestine and didn't like my response when I said there should be equal justice for both Jews and Palestinians. He voted against me so I was rejected by three votes to two. I would have been the first 'black' candidate to be awarded a Rhodes scholarship," Dr Hargey said.

"The two members who had voted for me felt I had had a raw deal and should not have been asked loaded political questions. One of them, Colin Kinghorn, was so livid that he arranged for me to receive a five-year Oppenheimer Scholarship. So once again luck was with me as I was better off than if I had won the Rhodes scholarship.

"I arrived in Oxford in 1976 to study at St Antony's. My DPhil was on the subject of slavery in Islam in the Nile valley. After my time in Oxford and working for a while in London as an academic researcher, I was appointed as a lecturer at the University of Cape Town to teach History and Religious Studies. The irony was that my colour meant I could not study there but was able to teach!

"Since I was committed to a non-racial society, I joined the anti-apartheid struggle. After writing incendiary tracts, I was jailed for a few weeks and threatened with permanent imprisonment, obliging me to leave South Africa to be free."

"In 1990 I purchased a decrepit old Russian Lada 4X4 and drove from Cape Town, across Africa and the vast Sahara, to London. I made that journey by myself because, on the day of departure, a friend who was coming with me chickened out."

"In the Sahara, I got stuck in the sand for several days – and was only rescued by a passing Algerian military vehicle after they had relieved me of my remaining food!"

This remarkable and adventurous odyssey has remained indelibly etched in his mind as it shows it is possible to do the impossible.

Dr Hargey continued: "I went to the USA and lectured first in Texas and California



before being appointed Professor of African and Islamic studies in Missouri and New York. At the time, one of my research interests was to understand the proliferation of Aids and its social implications in Southern Africa."

A year before the end of apartheid, in June 1993, Dr Hargey met Dr Jacqueline Woodman, the woman who was to become his wife. The meeting came during a ten-country research trip across Southern Africa to collect data about Aids which, ironically took him back to Cape Town.

"I went to interview the clinical head of obstetrics and gynaecology at Paarl Hospital outside Cape Town, and was about to leave when he asked if I was married. When I replied 'no', he said: 'Are you free to come to my house for dinner?'"

"He called Jacqueline and invited her too. A day after our meeting, I jokingly asked if she wanted to join me on my research trip. I was thinking she would say 'no' but she agreed and her medical superintendent, with encouragement from her mentor, gave her the required leave," Dr Hargey said.

"We survived an intense eight-week journey travelling 9,000 miles in a small Mazda. That proved we were compatible. Although of a similar 'racial' background, Jacqueline is a practicing Christian and I am a practicing Muslim.

"Afterwards we conducted a long distance relationship until, in 2001, I returned to Oxford to become Director of the Oxford Centre for British Islam. I encouraged Jacqueline to come and do a DPhil in Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Wolfson College.

THIS year's Oxford Muslim Music Festival takes place on Saturday, November 9, from 3pm to 12am in the Jacqueline du Pré Music Room, St Hilda's College. Talented artists from around the Islamic world will provide non-stop entertainment that is appreciated by music aficionados as well as those of all faiths and none. Delectable Muslim cuisine and exotic soft drinks will be on sale. All-day ticket prices range from £15 to £30 and will be available on the door; online from www.meco.org.uk or call 01865 766032.

"We married in 2003 in a civil wedding in Port St John along South Africa's Wild Coast. We had both wanted religious blessings to confirm our union but it was not possible to find clerics to do so at that time. Ten years later, we held a joint four-day interfaith wedding in March of this year with friends and family coming from all over the world and South Africa at a spectacular nature reserve to witness simultaneous Islamic and Christian ceremonies."

Dr Hargey discovered he was not alone in believing that love can cross the religious divide.

"Ten years ago, a student of Pakistani origin, attending one of my Qur'an seminars approached me. He was in love with an American Mormon girl and could not find anyone who would marry them as she did not want to convert to Islam. I agreed to marry them. There is nothing in the Qur'an against marrying people of other faiths but Islam requires a pre-nuptial agreement."

When I interviewed Dr Hargey, he had just conducted a marriage of a Muslim woman of Malay origin to a Christian man in Amsterdam and has also married Muslims to Hindus and Shias to Sunnis. He had recently also preached to packed congregations in the Baptist Cathedral in Tbilisi (Georgia), becoming the first Muslim theologian to do so.

The Muslim Educational Centre of Oxford holds weekly Qur'an seminars open to all.

"We offer a huge range of cultural, intellectual and social events designed to bring people together in the spirit of a most beautiful passage of the Qur'an.

"O Humanity; We have made you from a single male and a single female and We have made you into tribes and nations so that you may recognise each other and not despise one another. Surely, most honourable of you in the sight of God are those who are righteous".

We had come to point when Dr Hargey must make his desert island choice.

"I can draw a map of the world fairly accurately so I would like an astrolabe. That would indicate where I was at any time and also assist me in finding the direction of prayer. Books? I would take the *Muqaddimah* or *Prolegomena*, the pioneering treatise by the famous 14th century Muslim scholar, Ibn Khaldun who is rightly regarded as the father of modern history, sociology and economics.

"The other volume is by Ibn Battuta, the renowned Moroccan explorer at the time of Marco Polo who eclipsed the Italian as the most intrepid traveller of the medieval world. His quixotic journeys, in excess of half a million miles, are immortalised in the *Travels of Ibn Battuta*."

"Can I have music? MECO started the trailblazing Oxford Muslim Music Festival ten years ago. At both the festival and also on Oxtopia, I would like a recording of The Christian Lord's Prayer and Surah Fatihah, the seminal opening chapter of the Qur'an sung together in uplifting harmony. It would help convey the message that here is one God and one humanity."

As for art, I would like a painting of the Taj Mahal, not for any narcissistic reasons. My beloved father named his first born after it saying 'It is the only building in the world built to celebrate love.'

This seems very suitable for a man who tries to make love possible across the divides erected by society and culture.