

“This moving and inspirational resource is an encouragement to those seeking interfaith understanding. At a time when we often hear only of negativity coming out of Jerusalem, this book introduces us to some lovely individuals in the city who share with us in a personal way their own spiritual practice. It is beautifully balanced between the different faiths, and also between different groups and cultures within those faiths. An emerging theme is the interplay between spirituality and action, and how these cannot be separated in today’s world. Challenging questions in each chapter lead readers to prayer, making the resource useful for individuals and study groups alike.”

—ANDREW WINGATE, interfaith adviser and author of *Celebrating Difference, Staying Faithful: How to Live in a Multi-faith World*

“As I read *Gateways to the Divine*, I sensed that this is going to be a useful and educative resource for anyone seeking a greater appreciation of the diversity of religious experience today. This is an excellent and unusual book in the way it brings together historic resources and contemporary unheard voices in the search for authentic spirituality. In today’s polarized and divided world, this resource breaks barriers and literally opens up gateways of fresh encounter and understanding. It calls us to attentive listening to the Other.”

—MICHAEL LEWIS, Archbishop of Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East; Bishop of Cyprus and the Gulf

“This profound book takes the reader deep into the center and the soul of the holy city of Jerusalem. It goes far beneath the surface of things and will enrich all those who delve into the riches. The description of the city which the author knows so well will resonate with those who have visited and will enchant those who have not known its treasures and its complexities. We are drawn into fresh encounters with diverse spiritual traditions which will help build interfaith relationships, whatever our context.”

—RICHARD SEWELL, Dean of St. George’s College, Jerusalem

Canon Mayes provides what only a person who has walked through these gates and lived with the people of Jerusalem can do for us: share and then reflect upon insights of the faithful 'living stones' from Islam, Judaism and Christianity. As they follow their faith journeys day by day, a multi-faceted context opens before us, weaving together biblical, historical and spiritual insight. A simply excellent resource to lead the reader toward deeper understanding, not just of Jerusalem and her people, but of their own faith journey, too.

—CANON ROBERT D. EDMUNDS, Middle East Partnership Officer,
Episcopal Church USA

Gateways to the Divine

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TRANSFORMATIVE PATHWAYS OF PRAYER
FROM THE HOLY CITY OF JERUSALEM



Andrew D. Mayes



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GATEWAYS TO THE DIVINE

Transformative Pathways of Prayer from the Holy City of Jerusalem

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Introduction

Crossing the Threshold

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name. (Ps 100:4)

STEP ACROSS THE THRESHOLD and enter another spiritual world! The gates of the Holy City of Jerusalem beckon us to become pilgrims ready to explore diverse worlds of prayer. Each is an entry point into a different world spirituality. A transformative journey opens up before us as we encounter ancient yet fresh pathways of prayer, triggering both questions and resonances, inviting us to reconsider and expand our present practice of prayer.

Each gateway leads us to a different expression of prayer and opens before us a spiritual practice that we may not have encountered before. To cross a threshold always involves a risk, as we leave behind our status quo and routines, exposing ourselves to unfamiliar, challenging ways that might change the very way we pray and relate to God. The city gates of Jerusalem lure us in, each summoning us to discover another world. Each draws the pilgrim soul to its unique challenges and blessings.

Thirty short interviews with contemporary Jerusalemite practitioners of their respective traditions enable us to discover firsthand how their spirituality impacts their lives. The

conversationalists recorded here—from the impoverished peasant in the gutter to the patriarch on his throne—represent a kaleidoscope of spiritual traditions, a mosaic of people. Chapters include a short extract from classic spiritual writers of each tradition, so we can engage firsthand with their treasures.

Historical and Contemporary Meeting Points

In all places on earth, gates are poignant symbols of discovery and interaction. From the beginning, the gates of Jerusalem have been places of significant encounter. David, first Israelite king in Jerusalem, met with his people there: “Then the king got up and took his seat in the gate. The troops were all told, ‘See, the king is sitting in the gate’; and all the troops came before the king” (2 Sam 19:8). The gate is a place for socializing and meeting others, so the psalmist observes: “I am the subject of gossip for those who sit in the gate” (Ps 69:12). It is a place for celebration: “I may recount all your praises, and, in the gates of daughter Zion, rejoice in your deliverance” (Ps 9:14). For Amos, the gate is to be place of honesty and justice: “They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth . . . they push aside the needy in the gate. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious” (Amos 5:10, 12, 15).

Today’s pilgrim to the holy city encounters the sixteenth-century crenulated battlements encircling the city, built by Suleiman the Magnificent, white stone aglow in bright sunshine. The walls of Jerusalem, originating in the fear of attack and the imperative to close the community off protectively, have been destroyed and rebuilt eighteen times throughout history. A Jebusite wall, revealed by archaeology, testifies to Jerusalem’s early history: David encountered this in his initial attack in about 1000 BCE (2 Sam 5). Three hundred years later, Hezekiah strengthened the city’s defenses in the face of the Assyrian threat: his massive Broad Wall, eight meters high and eight meters thick, has come to the light of day once again in recent excavations in the Jewish quarter. Nehemiah’s

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mission in the sixth century BCE was to rebuild the walls after their destruction by the Babylonians, and he gives us a vivid account (Neh 4–6). In 70 CE the Romans under Titus besieged the city that had come under the control of Jewish zealots. Hadrian rebuilt the walls when remodeling the city as Aelia Capitolina in 135, and his forum is still to be seen beneath Damascus Gate. The walls have seen a succession of attacks: by the Crusaders in 1099 and Saladin in 1187; General Allenby initiated the British Mandate in 1921 by claiming control of the bulwarks, and after bitter fighting in June 1967, Israeli snipers scaled the parapets to seize charge of them.

But punctuating the walls are seven great city gates that bid us cross their thresholds into a different world. They not only open the wonder of different quarters in the Holy City but also lead us to very different spiritual worlds as well.

Origins of This Book

As an Anglican Franciscan (a member of the Third Order of the Society of Saint Francis) I am committed to its principle: “The Order sets out, in the name of Christ, to break down barriers between people . . . Our chief object is to reflect that openness to all which was characteristic of Jesus.”¹ Living in Jerusalem at Saint George’s College Jerusalem as Course Director, I wondered how I might somehow fulfil such a challenge. I realized that it must begin with listening and the avoidance of superficiality, so I set out to initiate conversations with people—first those who actually live on the Way of the Cross today, the Via Dolorosa, and later with practitioners or disciples of different faith traditions represented in the Holy City, a holy city paradoxically riven with bitter divisions and fractures. I was struck by the fact that not only were people prepared to share their stories and spiritual experience, but they actually appreciated the chance to really be listened to! I was also privileged to lead a small, intimate interfaith gathering at Saint

1. Third Order Society of St. Francis, “The Principles.”

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George's Cathedral on behalf of the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem, where two or three representatives from the Jewish, Islamic and Christian traditions met monthly to listen to one another's scriptures and to listen "with the heart." Subsequently working in the Diocese of Chichester as Diocesan Spirituality Adviser, and fulfilling a similar role in the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, and on return visits to Jerusalem as associate professor, I began to see how I could carry on this privileged task. Such exchanges always have the potential to shift perceptions and open up new doors of understanding—the aim of this book.

Outline

The Gate of Mercy and Gate of Repentance make up the Golden Gate on the eastern side of the Temple Mount—but these are long-sealed and await, according to tradition, the returning Messiah to open them. The blocked Golden Gate calls us to examine our openness to encountering religious traditions other than our own. The opening chapter beckons us to leave our comfort zone, dismantle any barriers, and to reflect on the challenge of unblocking any resistance we may have to encountering other spiritual worlds. So we are ready to step out on a journey of discovery as the open gates of Jerusalem summon us. In this introduction, as in all the following chapters, there is a suggested prayer exercise and questions for individual or group reflection, with suggestions for further reading.

The next four chapters usher us into contrasting spiritual worlds, by way of five elements:

1. Invitation: stepping across the gateway, answering the alluring summons, crossing threshold to another spiritual world
2. Encounter: describing a spirituality practice and featuring interviews about how people pray
3. Discovery: examining key themes of the tradition, taking a look at significant spiritual writers

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4. Reflection: questions for individual thought or group discussion
5. Experience: prayer exercises enabling us to incorporate something of the learning into our own spiritual practice

First, we enter by way of the southern gate, which leads us immediately to the Jewish tradition and the spirituality of the Kabbalah as practiced by the Hasidic Jews worshipping at the Western Wall. We will meet with Rabbi Mendel as he unpacks for us the way this tradition shapes and reshapes daily life. Kabbalah mystic Cordovero (from the sixteenth century) introduces us to key concepts; we learn too from Israel Ben Eliezer (from the eighteenth century) and Isaac Luria (again from the sixteenth century) and engage with the idea of *tikkun*, repairing the world.

Next we allow the Zion Gate to lead us into the heart of Armenian spirituality, introduced to us by Father Emmanuel, and the treasures of Syriac spirituality as shared by Sister Jostina and Father Shem'ôn. Our teachers are Armenian mystics Gregory of Narek (from the tenth century) and Nersēs Shnorhali (from the eleventh century) and Syriac writers Ephrem (from the fourth century) and Isaac the Syrian (from the seventh century).

The New Gate leads us into conversations with the superior of the Franciscans in the Holy Sepulcher and with the Greek patriarch of Jerusalem. We learn about Saint Francis's spirituality of the Cross, while one of the greatest mystics of the Eastern Church, Symeon the New Theologian (from the tenth century), leads us into a spirituality of Divine Light.

Herod's Gate entices us into the world of the Sufis as we meet with Sheikh Ahram, overseer of Islamic holy places in Jerusalem, and with Hala, widow of the great Jerusalemite interfaith pioneer Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhari. Three Sufi mystics guide us into their world: Raba'a (from the eighth century), Baba Farid (from the twelfth century) and Rumi (from the thirteenth century).

The Lion Gate takes us along the Via Dolorosa, the Way of the Cross, as we meet its present-day residents and engage with their hopes, heartaches, and fears. We talk with Israeli yeshiva students,

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Palestinian Christians and Muslims, with those who work with children and young people today on the Via Dolorosa. Suggestions are offered for praying a contemporary Way of the Cross.

As we descend a stunning flight of steps to the magnificent Damascus Gate, a common entry point shared by the faithful from all the religions, it invites us to identify common themes in the contrasting spiritualities. We compare and contrast approaches to such themes as naming the Divine (the invocation of divine names); divinization within mortality; the place of the heart; the role of the body in prayer practices; and the interrelationship between the mystical and prophetic, the inner life and the outer life in the world.

Finally, the wide and noble Jaffa Gate opens the city to the west. The Jaffa Gate catapults us back into the world we inhabit, leading as it does to port and airport from which pilgrims return to their home contexts renewed and transformed. Named also the Gate of the Friend because it points to Abraham's city of Hebron, the Jaffa Gate reminds us that Abraham, father of the monotheistic religions, teaches us how to cultivate an utter openness to the divine, how to develop a pilgrim heart, how to practice hospitality to the Other, and how to take risks and foster interfaith friendships. These issues lead us from the encounters in this book to the interfaith opportunities and challenges that we face in our own setting and context.

This is a resource for individuals or groups. It would make an unusual and stimulating Lent course, for example,² but can be used at any time of year by a study group or interfaith group. Participants can be encouraged to keep a "travel diary" or journal, to note reactions and responses to the journey or to reflect on shifting perceptions. Such material can perhaps be shared with a "soul friend" or spiritual director. Noticing what excites or inspires you, what fills you with caution, what resistance or openness you feel—all this tells you about your own spiritual journey right now.

2. If used for a Lent course, the introduction could be combined with the first session and the Jaffa Gate with chapter 7, making six sessions.

Doors of Opportunity

The opening of doors is a powerful biblical image. The Risen Lord calls out to us: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (Rev 3:20). In his narrative of the early church, Luke describes the pushing back of doors: “When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). Paul too develops the metaphor of the open door: “A wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries” (1 Cor 16:19). He relates: “When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord” (2 Cor 2:12). He asks: “Pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison” (Col 4:3).

Fling Wide the Gates

Psalm 87 reminds us that Jerusalem is a universal wellspring of faith, and from it we can trace many diverse life-giving traditions of spirituality: “The source of my life springs from Jerusalem!” (Ps 87:7, NLT):

On the holy mount stands the city he founded;
the LORD loves the gates of Zion
more than all the dwellings of Jacob.

Glorious things are spoken of you,
O city of God.

Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon;
Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia—
“This one was born there,” they say.

And of Zion it shall be said,
“This one and that one were born in it”;
for the Most High himself will establish it.