

Book Reviews

The Bible and Christian Ethics

Singh DE & Farr, BC (ed.).

Oxford: Regnum

The Bible and Christian Ethics is a collection of essays that appeared in *Transformations*, the journal of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. It covers a number of topics on the relations between the Bible and Christian ethics, including contributions on poverty, economic justice, the family and the environment. The contributions span a period of more than 30 years.

The title creates the impression that the contributions deal chiefly with the challenging topic of the use of the Bible in Christian ethics. As such the reader expects thorough reflection on hermeneutics, issues related to the use of both the Old and the New Testaments, and a substantiated dialogue with theologians that engage these issues. This is, largely, not the case. The contributors to this book rather seem more interested in identifying a number of fundamental, or general, principles in selected Biblical texts or books.

The exceptions are the contributions by Stephen Mott and Ronald Sider and Andrew Hartropp. In these contributions one finds traces of the methodological and hermeneutical reflection many Christian ethicists would expect in a book of this nature. In many of the other contributions, however, authors seem to move effortlessly between descriptions of ethics in a particular collection of texts, book or testament to the implications for ethics today. Many ethicists – including the reviewer – would find it difficult to appreciate the application of identified ‘Biblical’ themes without appropriate methodological and hermeneutical reflection. The challenge of appreciating many of the conclusions drawn by the authors is compounded by the fact that they, by and large, do not contextualise their arguments in terms of the reflection of contemporary Christian ethicists or theories in the field of Christian ethics.

If one sets the abovementioned reservations aside, one does encounter a few interesting clusters of topics. Specifically, the contributions on child theology deserve to be mentioned in this regard. In a few contributions, however, one do find largely unsubstantiated affirmations of particular ideologies. A case in point is Getu’s defence of capitalism.

No collection of essays is perfect. This is certainly also not the case for *The Bible and Christian Ethics*. Does this mean that this book is of little use to those interested in the use of the Bible in Christian ethics? I would not venture that far, as the book

does have some merit. In order to appreciate its merit one has to take cognisance of the intellectual and ecclesial context within which this journal developed. It may very well be that the intention of this book is in fact not to be a scholarly contribution to Biblico-ethical hermeneutics, but rather to illustrate the relevance of the Bible for the ways in which ordinary Christians conduct their lives. Such a reading would also make sense, should one take the aims of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies into account.

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Jesus and the Cross: Reflections of Christians from Islamic Contexts

David Emmanuel Singh (Ed.) 2008.

Regnum Books International: Oxford (226 pages)

This publication is presented as one of three books forming part in the larger series *Regnum Studies in Global Christianity*. The Regnum Studies series explores the issues with which Christianity struggles, with particular attention on ministry rooted in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America.

This particular publication is the first in the series of three. The second in the trilogy is entitled *Jesus and the Incarnation* (2011). The third in the series is entitled *Jesus and the Resurrection* (2014). With this publication entitled *Jesus and the Cross*, the editor tried to bring together perspectives on the meaning of the cross of Jesus and how the cross can become a starting point for Christian-Muslim dialogue.

The main issue in this publication is the question of the crucifixion of Jesus. This is dealt with by Christians as a historical event with spiritual consequences. Muslims treat the crucifixion as an implausible event based on the belief in an omnipotent and transcendent God who can never be perceived to die on a cross creating the perception of human victory over divinity. The cross will imply humiliation of God and imply God is weak and unable to fulfil his will and protect his messengers. Muslims argue that the Christian conviction of the cross of Jesus must therefore be false and corrupt. The factual events as well as the meaning of the cross have been falsified by Christians. Compare in this regard the introductory remarks in the Foreword by Lamin Sanneh (page vii). The different views on the cross of Jesus therefore become an unbridgeable hindrance in Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Sanneh (page viii) identifies one main issue when he indicates that the cross is still largely perceived among Muslims as symbolising Western civilization. Muslim objection to Western civilization leads to an outright rejection of the cross.

Although the publication forms part of the trilogy of publications in the *Regnum Studies in Global Christianity* which is to be read against a missiological perspective, Sanneh indicates that this publication has the intention of providing resources for reflection on the study of the cross in Islam. A second intent is clearly mentioned and should not be underestimated in this publication, namely that of providing resources for reflection on intercultural relations (page ix). Western and Muslim cultures need to break down perceived barriers in order to engage.

In the Introduction David E. Singh puts the contributions in the publication in perspective when he suggests the contributions be read against the world events of violence and conflict (page 1). The cross is for Christians the symbol of sacrifice and reconciliation whereby God invites all people to experience reconciliation through Jesus ending all violence and conflict. The contributions all want to address the central question of how Christians living in Muslim contexts reflect on the cross (page 1). The contributions may reflect different opinions, as for example Clinton Bennett who suggests that the cross should not be portrayed as being central to Christianity. God is capable of loving sinful people without the price of the cross to be paid (page 174). Opposed to this Kenneth Cragg (page 177) emphasises the centrality of the cross to the Christian message and indicates the presence of references to the cross in the Qur'an. It is indeed enjoyable reading to see a balanced approach to the topic. What is however lacking is a clear Muslim understanding of the meaning of the cross.

The content of the publication is divided into three parts: Part One *The Cross and the Scriptures*, Part Two *Reflections from Contexts* with a subdivision into two parts, firstly on *Early Discourse* and secondly on *Reflections from Selected Regions*. Part Three deals with *Theological Reflections*.

The first three contributions in Part One never mention Islam as they investigate the Old and New Testament for traces of the roots of the concepts associated with the cross. The lamb, the suffering servant, justice, prophethood and sacrificial atonement all form part of the important backdrop for what is to follow.

One of the most significant contributions is that of Kenneth Cragg where he indicates that Islam and Christianity responded differently to the same question of power. Islam responded with the Hijrah, the flight of Muhammed from Mecca when he was confronted with the problem of convincing people to believe. The New Testament responded by indicating how power must be renounced up to the point of the humiliation of Jesus dying on the cross, the ultimate symbol of powerlessness. The Qur'an does not deny the importance of Jesus. The difference according to Cragg with the New Testament lies in the understanding of Messiah. For the Qur'an Jesus is the Messiah in as far as he is the anointed messenger. For Christianity Jesus is the Messiah in terms of being God's Redeemer of all humankind (page 40). Islam sees the Hijrah as part of the process towards the political kingdom powerfully driving

the message of Muhammed. Jesus became the One suffering out of love, renouncing power. Both Jesus and Muhammed however suffer, Muhammed with the Hijrah and Jesus on the cross. Christianity accepted the suffering Jesus as their Lord. This provides important insights for Christian-Muslim conversation on the cross.

Part Two consists of two subsections. In the first sub-section the historical background to the issue of the cross is addressed. Early Christian views on the cross are presented as well as a detailed analysis by Ivor M. Beaumont on how Muslims and Christians differ on the interpretation of the cross. The Qur'an states clearly that Jesus did not die on the cross although the Jews may think they killed him. Jesus was in fact taken up into heaven by God only to reappear once more in future on earth to then die as a mere mortal. The Muslim objection to the crucifixion therefore is based on two arguments: God will not allow his messenger to be humiliated by death on a cross and the character of God will be blemished if a divine Jesus died on the cross (page 56). Christians misinterpreted the cross leading to the false conviction that Jesus died on the cross.

The second sub-section deals with reflections from various contexts, ranging from Afghanistan, Indonesia, Palestine, Africa, India to Pakistan. In these contributions the inter-cultural relations between Christians and Muslims are emphasised. The possibility of utilising folklore to convey the message of the cross to Muslims is examined. This inevitably leads to a theology of culture (page 82). Another significant contribution is that by Jose Abraham (page 105-113) indicating the relevance of Rene Girard's concept of the scapegoat for understanding the concept of the cross and the sacrificial atonement it provides.

Part Three contains several theological reflections on the manner in which Christians can communicate the Gospel to Muslims with reference to the cross. The possibility of the suffering prophet, the absence of the cross and the recognition of the cross in the Qur'an are all possible approaches suggested for witnessing to Muslims.

The most significant contributions in Part Three are the dialogue between Bennett and Cragg on the absence/presence of the cross in the Quran. David Singh's contribution forms a good final chapter in the publication. Singh suggests that a dialogue on the cross between Muslims and Christians would require moving away from the traditional structure and investigate the possibility of finding common ground in an alternative structure. The alternative structure is based on mysticism as found in Islam and Christianity as expounded by John Hick. This notion reminds of the publication by Syafaatun Almirzanah (2011, *When Mystic Masters Meet: Towards a new matrix for Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, Blue Dome: New York) which deals with a similar concept of mysticism as point of contact between Christians and Muslims.

Singh indicates that when the symbolic value of some beliefs is emphasised barriers between the two religions are removed. Jesus as the son of God should not be

understood literally but rather indicate his extreme obedience to the will of God resulting in a close relationship with God. Concerning the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus, Singh suggests based on the alternative structure that Jesus be perceived as the Perfect Man, parallel to the concept of the Logos as eternal pre-existing knowledge. Mohammed and Jesus then can become the Perfect Man, Mohammed as the one with knowledge (page 193) about God and Jesus as the exemplary model for perfect moral behaviour and obedience to God (page 199). The cross then becomes the way I which divine love is expressed towards sinful human beings destined to die.

The complete publication adds value to the understanding of Christian-Muslim relations. For the Christian reader the publication provides a stimulus to reflect on the Christian convictions on the cross as well as provide material to reflect on the possibilities of witnessing to Muslims. For myself the greatest value in this publication lies in the contribution it makes to understand the delicate nature of Christian-Muslim relations.

The publication indeed provides a very good read for all interested in Muslim-Christian relations. As the publication has the feel of a scholarly work, it is most valuable to scholars in the field. As this publication forms part of a trilogy, all three publications should be read as a whole in order to appreciate the totality of the research project.

In conclusion, a remark by Beaumont summarises this publication. He emphasises that it should be important for Christians to familiarize themselves with the content of the Qur'an. He comes to this conclusion based on the example set by the 8th century patriarch of Baghdad, Timothy, who engaged in dialogue with Muslims exhibiting a good knowledge of the Qur'an (page 56). This publication makes Christians aware of the need to know the Qur'an.

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Jesus and the Incarnation: Reflections of Christians from Islamic Contexts

David Emmanuel Singh (Ed.) 2011.

Regnum Books International: Oxford (245 pages)

This publication is presented as one of three books forming part in the larger *series Regnum Studies in Global Christianity*. The Regnum Studies series explores the issues with which Christianity struggles, with particular attention on ministry rooted in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America.

This particular publication is the second in the series of three. The first in the trilogy is entitled *Jesus and the cross* (2009). The third in the series is entitled *Jesus and the Resurrection* (2014). With this publication entitled *Jesus and the Incarnation*, the editor tried to bring together various perspectives on the incarnation as perceived from a Christian as well as Muslim point of view. All contributors are however addressing the topic from a Christian perspective. This is an indication of the underlying purpose of the series: to provide Christians with material to utilise in conversations with Muslims with a missiological aim. The missiological motive is subtly woven into the fabric of each of the contributions. In the Introductory chapter, David E. Singh already points out that the discussion on the Word which is the basis for a sense of community does not become an end in itself, but must lead to become the means of Christian dialogue with and witness to Muslims (page 3). Singh however emphasises that the purpose of this publication is not to portray Muslims as “objects of mission”, as the reader might suspect, but rather to indicate the importance of love and respect and viewing Muslims as fellows (page 17).

When discussing the incarnation, it becomes clear from the outset that the difference between the Christian and Muslim understanding of incarnation comes down to embodiment. Singh believes that the conviction of a “pre-existing Word” can form the starting point for Christian and Muslim reflection on the incarnation (page 4). For Christians the incarnation confirms God’s revelation in the person of Jesus. The Logos becomes flesh in Jesus. The Trinitarian understanding of God enables Christians to portray God as Father, Son (in Jesus) and the Holy Spirit. Jesus is God incarnate. For Muslims the incarnation can be expressed as the revelation of the Word in an Arabic book, the Qur’an. The eternal Qur’an takes on the physical form in the Qur’an. The difference in understanding the incarnation can be summarised, as formulated by Singh (page 4): for Christians “The Word made Person/Flesh” and for Muslims “The Word made Book”. Clinton Bennett’s version to this is to differentiate between the processes of “Incarnation” and “Bookification” (page 108).

Muslims struggle to accept the divine nature embodied in Jesus and therefore reject the incarnation of God in Jesus. God can never have a son as this will undermine the strict monotheistic and unitarian understanding of God in Islam. This argument is well illustrated in the contribution by Mark I. Beaumont (page 155-167). A Muslim “Christology” will entail perceiving Jesus as the Messiah emphasising Jesus being anointed while being part of the long line of messengers sent by God. This theme becomes apparent in all contributions. The pre-existence of the Word is assumed in this argument, enabling the incarnation of this pre-existing Word in different incarnational varieties.

The majority of the contributions in the publication share one more subtle similarity: the reference to the contribution of Kenneth Cragg to the dialogue between Muslim

and Christians. Cragg's contribution to Christian-Muslim relations is highlighted by several contributors. Cragg himself gives an insightful contribution to this publication.

The contributions in the publication are divided into three parts: The Word, Community and Dialogue and Witness. Part One (The Word) deals with the perspective that incarnation to Muslims in particular refer to the embodiment in the Qur'an. The relation of the Bible to the Qur'an is discussed in terms of perspectives on Jesus as incarnation of the Word (John 1:14) and similarities and differences between the traditions found in the Qur'an and in the Bible. The possibility of translating the Bible (The Word) into Arabic for the use of Arabs and Muslims are discussed. The contribution by John Azumah summarises this section of the publication well. Azumah clearly indicates that culture must be seen as a shell from which religion hatches (page 76). When translating the Bible into different contexts, the local culture must hatch its own version of faith.

In Part Two (Community) several examples from various contexts are utilised to demonstrate the way in which Muslims and Christians differ regarding the incarnation. Part Three (Dialogue and Witness) deals with the missiological possibilities stemming from the different understandings of the incarnation. It is in this section that the most noteworthy contribution can be found. Jose Abraham's contribution entitled *Newbigin's Reformulation of Christology and its implications for a Christian-Muslim Dialogue* challenges Christians in putting forth a Christology that enables a dialogue on the incarnation with Muslims. For Muslims God's transcendence dominates their doctrine of God. For Christians the immanence of God stands central in Christian Theology (page 175). This contribution explains the missiological possibilities the concept of the incarnation provides. As Abraham indicates, the mystery of God should rather form the point of departure for Christian-Muslim dialogue and not the divine and human nature of Jesus (page 176).

The complete publication adds value to the understanding of Christian-Muslim relations. For the Christian reader the publication provides a stimulus to reflect on the Christian convictions on the incarnation as well as to provide material for reflection on the possibilities of witnessing to Muslims. For me the greatest value in this publication lies in the contribution it makes to understanding the delicate nature of Christian-Muslim relations.

The publication indeed provides a very good read to all interested in Muslim-Christian relations. As the publication has the feel of a scholarly work, it is most valuable to scholars in the field. It however, as indicated earlier, also proves valuable to those interested in missiological endeavours from a Christian perspective.

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