

Book Reviews

Muslims and Christians Debate Justice and Love

David L. Johnston

Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2020. 202 pages.

Johnston, who spent over a decade as an evangelical clergyman in Algeria and a teacher in Egypt and the West Bank, hopes his book, *Muslims and Christians Debate Justice and Love*, will help reinforce the cooperative spirit between nations that seems to be diminishing in the contemporary world.

Initially misled by the title, I was expecting the book to be a qualitative study based on interviews with Muslims and Christians debating justice and love. Instead it is a collection of chapters investigating how Christian and Muslim scholars separately have addressed these concepts over time. The book consists of seven chapters with a conclusion.

We should commend Johnston on bringing together scholarship on these two virtues (justice and love) into a single volume. In this day and age, justice and love are often seen as separate entities. One can be just, but that might involve overlooking love. Love is often seen as a 'touchy feely' concept not suitable for serious scholarship, especially in relation to governance. By insisting that "justice and love are both complementary and inseparable" (2), and by tying both to governance, Johnston helps us appreciate the real-world implications of what happens when justice as love is missing. By seeing humanity's failures in this regard, Johnston prompts us to do better. He insists that justice-love is essential for human flourishing.

After the introductory chapter, where he lays out his key claims, he opens each chapter with a case study of a current example where justice and love are missing: racial injustice in the United States (chapter 2); injustice towards Palestinians in Israel/Palestine (chapter 3); blasphemy law

in Pakistan (chapter 4); Christian experience of injustice in Egypt (chapter 5); Muslim-Christian violence in Nigeria (chapter 6); and the New Zealand shooting and Islamophobia in the USA (chapter 7).

The overarching thread that ties the seven chapters together is not always apparent. To make his case Johnston takes us down many paths, tying it together at the beginning and concluding chapter. He alternates chapters between Christian and Muslim scholarship on justice, and the reason/revelation debate (chapters 3 and 4); Qaradawi and the *maqasid al-shari'a* approach is treated in chapter 5. Chapters 6 and 7 cover love, respectively through first, the Common Word Initiative and Prince Ghazi's work, and, second, Christian agapism.

Given the importance of his main argument, I wish that he had been able to pull the justice-love thread more clearly throughout each chapter of the book, which sometimes reads as a lengthy annotated bibliography. Perhaps this was not possible due to his bringing together Christian and Muslim historical traditions on both justice and love, each of which topic fills shelves and shelves in any library.

Muslims are used to Evangelicals leading the anti-Muslim movement, so it is important to note that Johnston writes as an Evangelical seeking a different approach. He signed the "Chicago Invitation" in 2018, an evangelical declaration that commits to social justice (3). Thus, he is grounded in a Biblical perspective on justice-love, and an interfaith dialogue approach to this topic with Muslims.

Basing his argument on David Wolterstorff's Biblically-grounded theory of rights, Johnston investigates the Christian and Muslim traditions debating reason/revelation, justice, law, rights and love. He argues that Wolterstorff has best resolved the rights dilemma by positing a synthesis between the concept of rights as natural order versus individual rights: that it is God's "love for his image-bearing creatures that endows them with that inalienable worth" (171). As we live in a social order, rights are expressed through that order. Justice, hence, is best achieved through the concept of universal human rights, as expressed in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights. And this commitment to human rights is the best way to demonstrate our love for each other: "true love is giving each person his or her due [which] therefore coincides perfectly with the goals of justice" (12-13).

For Johnston this implies a commitment to ethical objectivism: the concept that justice is not whatever God commands; rather, since "God himself is committed to justice, justice itself must be a standard outside

both God and ourselves” (55). This commitment to ethical objectivism and the UNHDR leads Johnston to prefer Muslim reformers like Jamal al-Banna, Mohammed Hashim Kamali, and Tariq Ramadan (chapter 4), over Qaradawi and the *maqasid* approach. He believes that the latter are still too tied to the concept of subordinating reason to revelation, so that in the end commitment to justice is shortchanged, even having a “darker side” (108) due to top-down elitism that marginalizes certain voices: “there’s a whole area that is roped off and declared impermeable to human reason and values” (104). He suspects that Qaradawi stops short of following the reformers as a door he “as an alim cannot go through, purposive jurisprudence notwithstanding.” He hopes a new generation will argue that everything outside worship is open to change and “maybe then the traditional jurists, the ulama, will have worked themselves out of a job” (104). He believes Qaradawi’s campaign to “rehabilitate the traditionally central role of the ulama is not likely to succeed” (104).

Johnston says he has long “fought the stereotype that Muslims care only about justice while Christians only care about love” (3). And the book certainly demonstrates that. He surveys a lengthy tradition of Western Christian discussions on justice in conversation with their secular interlocutors. He suggests that Muslims have felt the “sting” of Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s observation that Muslims have been criticized as holding to a view of God as vengeful whose justice comes at the expense of love and mercy. He offers his book as an effort to reduce such “collective injury” (134). The chapter focused on the Common Word initiative (chapter 6), and his extended discussion of the document’s discussion of love for God and love for neighbor as common values binding Christians and Muslims clearly brings this to the fore.

The book concludes that Christians and Muslims have synergy on justice and love as “two sides of the same coin in the common revelation of the Abrahamic traditions” (169). Muslim scholars have made similar attempts, but I deeply appreciate his efforts as a Christian scholar for bringing this into focus.

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