

BOOK REVIEW

***Earth, Empire and Sacred Text: Muslims and Christians as Trustees of Creation*, David L Johnston, Equinox Publishing Ltd., London, 2010, ISBN-10 1845532252, Price (Hardback) £65.00/\$95.00, Publication Date: April 2010, Pages 652, Size 234 x 156mm.**

This book, extraordinary by any standard, sets out to establish a common discourse and a common ground between Muslims and Christians in relation to the human responsibility which they, along with Jews and other people of faith, share towards the world and the management of its resources.

Vast in its scope and tireless in its reasoning and use of sources, the book develops its thesis in three parts. Part I, in five chapters, seeks to deal with the promises and impasses (“double walls”) created by “Our Postmodern Situation”. This is deemed necessary in order to better place the subsequent discourses in the contemporary context and the challenges but also opportunities it provides. The range of authors, texts and postulates analysed here provides a foretaste, substantial as it is, of the breadth of the literature covered in the book. It also reveals the author’s method of not shying away from declaring his own Christian position or from tackling issues of difference while insisting on moving beyond them, even as he creatively invests in many of them. Here also is introduced the notion of “transition from theory to activism” in defence of human dignity and global healing—a notion that will be picked up in Part III. Of central presence here is the criticism levelled against “an arrogant and subjugating ‘Reality’” perceived to have been actively promoted by Western Modernism. The criticism underpins the author’s advocacy of human and civil rights “in a way that has resonance with people from among the variegated colours of the human tapestry”. The subchapters “An Approach to the Hermeneutics of Sacred Texts” (pp. 185-207) and “My Own Approach to the Qur’an” (pp. 232-236) are particularly interesting. They reflect the author’s deftness with the tools of analysis he is using across a range of disciplines as well as his scholarly detachment from some of the claims of the texts he examines. Equally important, they state his unrelenting resolve to adopt an approach that is “irenic and sympathetic”, one that is conducive to “mutual understanding and concerted action in relieving the suffering and upholding the dignity of our fellow human beings.”

Part II, also structured in five chapters, focuses on the theme of “Human Trusteeship” and the Muslim and Christian interpretations of it. The theme is central to the book’s engagement with ecological and social justice issues and with the main task of constructing/reconstructing the common ground between the faiths in these areas. An in-depth analysis of the Qur’anic concepts of *khilāfah* and *amānah*, pivotal as these are to the book’s thesis and design, occupies some 160 pages (pp. 239-403), during which some thirteen centuries of *tafsīr* schools (early, traditional, rationalist, Sufi, modern and

postmodern) and generations of interpreters (e.g. Mujahid bin Jabr, al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, al-Zamakhshari, al-Razi, Ibn al-‘Arabi, ‘Abdu, Iqbal, Bint al-Shati’, Qutb, Ahmed, Zardar, and Soroush) are presented. One interesting aspect of the material “unearthed” is the link between theology and politics. The link is introduced and critiqued in the section titled “The Red Flag of Caliphate Politics” and subsequent sections dealing with Muslim authors in the context of the contemporary, often turbulent, Muslim world. The following chapter (pp. 404-451) on the “Biblical Trusteeship of Humanity” examines Judeo-Christian formulations—mainly on the nature of God and his relationship with the world through incarnation. Complex or tortuous as it may be, this history can make interesting reading even for the non-specialist. It also helps place the Islamic contribution on the creation of Man and the subject of human responsibility in better relief. In response, Johnston notes that the “Christian side” is required to show “a willingness to commit to a holistic approach” and make “a strong stand for issues of economic and political justice and a commitment to work for peace.” Adept at theology, philosophy, critical theory and hermeneutics, and unhurried in using their tools, Johnston is nevertheless restless to address needs on the ground as in the minds. He notes that “holism will require an examination of local situations in their global setting and ask the difficult questions about Western hegemony [hence the “Empire” of the title!], the limits of democracy in a world increasingly run by a few transnational companies, and the issues of true power-sharing and responsible management of the earth’s resources”. Also significant is the fact that this sizeable part of the book underscores the relevance of the sacred texts to the issues of modernity while showcasing the considerable intellectual traffic (and interfaith dialogue) going on between Muslim and Christian thinkers and the extent of the knowledge they now have about each other’s perspectives. Part II concludes with the hopeful assertion that Muslims and Christians can effectively “shape a theological argument for jointly confronting today’s corporate globalisation and strengthening democratic bonds of solidarity between all levels of global civil society.”

Following from the above, the third Part of the book emerges as the culmination of the author’s endeavour to “connect the theory and data of the previous chapters” with the aim of providing “a viable theological foundation for Muslims and Christians to re-envision their joint God-given caliphate and carry it out more faithfully on this planet.” This Part, intricate as one might expect (with perspectives from the likes of Kung, Stassen, Kyung, Badawi, al-Faruqi, Peters, Rieger, Mazrui, Rasmussen and Arkoun), still manages to make absorbing reading. Its value is intensified by its bold and unfettered engagement with issues of human rights, wealth disparities, ecological degradation, monopolies and manipulations of power as well as by its search for and suggestion of practical programmes for collaborative work in the areas of reconciliation and emancipation, among others. The section “Hope in the Land of Abraham” in the concluding chapter of the book offers a model of such a programme. Placing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the context of the aforementioned treatise, it highlights the concept of justice (its complexity rightly emphasised by Naim S Ateek) and the necessity to address the injustices that have been and continue to be inflicted on the Palestinian people, every so often with the complicity of their own leaders. It also documents the work of the Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT) in the city of Hebron, the case benefiting from the author’s own work in the West Bank during 1998-1999. In its focus on the exploits of a faith-

based peacemaking group, the treatment calls to mind the pioneering work of Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson in their *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (1996) and subsequent works and reports by R. Scott Appleby, John Chikago and Douglas Johnston, among others. It also resonates with (and humbles) my own much more modest and somewhat visionary effort to suggest alternatives and possibilities in chapters 1, 2 and 6 of my *Beyond the Arab Disease: New Perspectives in Politics and Culture* (2005). As part of a fair, friendly, and receptive, though probing, Christian or “Western” approach to Islam, Johnston’s work can take a proud and distinctive place in a tradition extending from Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century, to Henry Stubbe in the eighteenth, Thomas Carlyle and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt in the nineteenth, and the likes of John L. Esposito, Clinton Bennett, Annemarie Schimmel, and Karen Armstrong of recent times.

Wide ranging, erudite and versatile, and with an unrelenting and certainly noble purpose, the book nevertheless recognises the difficulty it is bound to encounter in a largely secular and corporate-driven world. Bold in its challenge of perceived omissions and lacunae in secular scriptures (e.g. the UN Charter and the UDHR), and while rating as “urgent” the task of “building a universal ethic of human rights with the specific contributions of religious people”, the book makes the point that “the question cannot be resolved by theologians in isolation”. Any serious effort in that direction has to be worked out, it is emphasised, “in action, in the praxis of living out our God-given mandate to care for his creation—the earth itself and all it contains, starting with our suffering fellow human beings.”

Unswervingly hopeful, the book benefits from its author’s strong Christian faith as well as from his work for nearly sixteen years in Muslim-majority and Arabic-speaking countries, namely Algeria and Egypt along with the West Bank. Its passionate and cerebral engagement with dialogue is an engagement with an essentially diplomatic, pedagogic and Qur’anic tool and priority. As such, the book offers an indispensable source material and a roadmap for educators, students, scholars, diplomats and interfaith activists. And while it can take its time charting centuries of convoluted Qur’anic hermeneutics around the theme of Adam’s (also Eve’s?) caliphate, the book sounds a loud note of urgency with regard to the state of our collective home and the need to save it from abuse and disparities by way of alternative thinking and practical and holistic programmes. Its call for an attitude of reverence or sacredness to be re-invited into human and international relations is a worthy and timely contribution. Intellectually honest, trenchant and unsparing in indicating areas of disagreement and incompatibility, it shows a remarkable combination of self-confidence and transcendence to imaginatively invest in those areas with a view to establishing commonalities and mutual trust that might lead to real breakthroughs.

Finally, the book, colossal in its ambition and size but also in its ability to enthuse, is destined to retain its value and distinction as a classic in the field. It may, however, benefit from an abridged paperback edition for the non-specialist that can sum up the main theological and philosophical debates along with the relevant case studies and programmes for cooperative reflection, activism and peacemaking.

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