

BOOKS EVERYONE SHOULD READ

by Shirley W. Madany (1990s)

Over the years we have acquired a considerable number of books focused on the Middle East. We have collected every possible book by Samuel Zwemer, the missionary to Arabia at the turn of the century. Even though written early in this century they are still very relevant and a mine of information. We think it important to try to acquaint oneself with the background of this strategic field.

During a recent trip to Jordan we noticed how sheltered the average Middle Eastern Christian has been and how they also need to do some study their own environment. They know in a vague kind of way that they have been repressed but because they do not belong to vibrant Christian communities, only to strong family groups, they are not aware that it is the repression of Islam which has kept them from growing with vigor. If you aren't free to invite your Muslim neighbor to consider the claims of Christ then you aren't ever going to be a healthy Christian. And that is how it is in most Middle Eastern Muslim countries.

The Arab world rejoiced when one of its famous writers, 77 year old Nageeb Mahfouz, an Egyptian, whose books were frequently banned in Egypt, was recognized for the Nobel prize in literature. That momentarily made everyone forget that Mr. Mahfouz has been a severe critic of his own (Muslim) environment. In a recent interview (unfortunately in Arabic) he made some very strong statements about both the wholesale corruption of the bureaucracy running the country as well as the terrible lack of freedom which he has known for most of his life. Like a Communist dissident, he has felt the lack of this necessary ingredient for any artist. Talented people who see clearly and write with vision find it intolerable to be dictated to by the state.

Just as there is a book entitled THE CHRISTIAN MIND, by Harry Blamires, so also there is more than one book called THE ARAB MIND. I would recommend either one, though Raphael Patai's version, printed by Charles Scribner & Sons, New York, 1973 is more in the textbook category. The other "Arab Mind" is by the British author John Laffin, who has written numerous books drawn from his military and political studies of the Middle East. His THE ARAB MIND was printed by Cassell & Company, Ltd. of London, 1975.

As Bernard Lewis never ceases to point out, one needs to be aware of the complete absence of certain western words in the Muslim vocabulary or thinking pattern. This would be particularly with reference to comparisons between Islam and any other religion. We have referred before to the complete absence of separation of church and state and the necessity of a state being Islamic in order for its inhabitants to carry out all their religious duties. This is something which the European countries are having to deal with now when they find large concentrations of Islamic peoples in particular cities. They are demanding the right to have the call to prayer from their mosques, or the right to have time off for prayer while at work, and schools should be observing their moveable fast time, etc.

While mentioning Bernard Lewis this would be a good time to list a couple of his many books which are easy to read and most informative. They are THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE WEST, and

THE ARABS IN HISTORY, which can be found in Harper Torch Books, Harper & Row, New York, 1964 and still available.

History is not one of our strong points in this technological age. This puts us at a big disadvantage in the face of the latest wave of immigration into America. We don't know what to make of the highly visible piety of the Muslim faith. We realize that we don't measure up very well right from the start. At face value it would seem that this new religion, this later revelation, definitely has more vigor drive than the one to which we have been born. We may be excused, almost, if we even dare to agree with the latest brand of missiologists (newest form of missionaries) who will even say that to proclaim Christ as the only way to God is the height of arrogance). Hence the urgency of this reading list. Before making judgments we ought to become better informed over their past record.

Daniel Pipes, a lecturer on History at Harvard University has written a thought-provoking book entitled IN THE PATH OF GOD: ISLAM AND POLITICAL POWER, Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, New York, 1980. It would be difficult to find a page of this book that one did not want to quote from. As he points out early in the book, a Muslim wanting to fulfill all the requirements of his religion would need to live under "shari'a" law; very different from any western country's laws, so he would need to be involved in politics in order to achieve his ends. He says "religious imperatives have political implications, political actions have religious significance."

Something intriguing about Pipes' conclusions are the comparison he draws between the legalism of Judaism and the legalism of Islam, and one is amazed to find an entire section of this book dealing with the Apostle Paul and the beginnings of Christianity which made it impossible "to be Jewish and Christian at the same time." As Daniel Pipes points out, in contrast to both Jew and Muslim, who have made the law central in their lives, the Christian has internalized the law and knows that it is his faith which must inspire his ethical living or it has no value. He quotes from the letter of James "if faith does not lead to action, it is in itself a lifeless thing.) This is indeed a most thought-provoking book.

Just this summer, at a University second hand store, we came across a similar masterpiece of study, which could be recommended highly. It is FAITH AND POWER: The Politics of Islam by Edward Mortimer. Random House, New York, 1982. Its author, a British newspaper man, accepted the challenge to write it and took one year off to do so. So with a year's research he has come up with a fascinatingly constructed analysis of the world's current dilemma. Unlike Daniel Pipe's who approached his subject with a personal knowledge of Judaism, Edward Mortimer speaks frequently of his own Christian background.

There are three books telling very personal stories from entirely different angles, but all dealing with the Middle East, which I would also recommend. They are Hostage Bound, Hostage Free, by Benjamin Weir; Not Without My Daughter by Betty Mahmoudy and Blood Brothers by Elias Chacour. Weir's book will help you to relate the remaining hostages and their families. Forgotten men who have already endured too much--and for what purpose? The book by Betty Mahmoudy will shock you as it tells of the determined escape from Iran of an American wife who had to plot and scheme and then to be brave enough to cross, on horseback, the perilous mountains which

mark the border between Iran and Turkey. It was the only way in which the two of them could escape from exile in her husband's country of Iran.