

Islam: Its Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power, by George W. Braswell, Jr.
Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996. Pp. xii + 338. Price Unknown,
(paper)

Reviewed by Rev. Bassam M. Madany, in the
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There is a growing list of books on Islam and the Middle East. Some deal with specific topics such as political Islam or the rise of Islamic Fundamentalism. The book under review is unique. In fact, with some qualifications, it is encyclopedic. The author, Dr. George Braswell, is professor of missions and world religions at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. During the late sixties and early seventies, he taught at the Faculty of Islamic Theology of the University of Teheran, Iran.

In the twelve chapters of his book, the author gives us the necessary details about the origins of Islam, the life and teachings of Muhammad, the spread of this monotheistic religion, the empires that advanced the cause of Islam in the world, the status of the Muslim world today, and the future of the relationship between the West and the Islamic nations.

There are several unique features in this book. It provides the reader with the necessary information to become acquainted with Islam, without overwhelming him by too many details. It quotes at length from the primary sources such as the Qur'an and the Hadith, and gives several charts dealing with such topics as: Authority and Tradition in Islam, the Ninety-Nine Names of Allah, Historical Development of the Sects of Islam, The Islamic Prayer, and Islam's Heartland.

Unlike many other books on Islam which evade certain sensitive topics, Dr. Braswell is very concerned about the Christian-Muslim relations both in the West and in the Household of Islam. In chapter 11 dealing with the general theme of "The Encounter Between Islam and Christianity," he has this to say:

"Christianity needs to engage Islam about such topics as theocracy, the relationship of religion and government, the nature of religious pluralism in a society, and the provision of religious liberty and freedom of choice in religion. The way Islam answers these topics influences the missionary nature of Christianity, the sending of missionaries across cultures, the continuing relationship of Christianity and Islam, the freedom of individuals to choose their religion, and the protection provided citizens of a nation. Christianity in its encounter with Islam must raise the issue of religious liberty. On one hand the Qur'an states, 'Let there be no compulsion / In religion.' On the other hand it asserts, 'If any one desires / A religion other than / Islam (submission to Allah), / Never will it be accepted / Of him, and in the Hereafter / He will be in the ranks / Of those who have lost.' Within Islam can Christianity stand alongside Islam and be granted the freedom of expression? Can a Muslim have the right to change religion or is it apostasy punishable by death?"

However, there are a few statements in the book which need to be clarified or corrected. For example, the reference to India on page 35 is rather vague. "The recent history of India has seen partitions of lands resulting in an Islamic state and also much internal conflict within India." Actually, it was upon the insistence of the majority of the Muslims of India, prior to the end of the British rule, that the country was partitioned in 1947 between Muslims and Hindus. That gave birth to Pakistan. Then, about two decades later, a conflict occurred within the Islamic state when the Bengali Muslims of the East revolted against the hegemony of the Punjabis of West Pakistan and formed the Republic of Bangladesh.

On page 40, "the oil embargo against the West" is dated as having occurred "in the 1960s." Actually it took place in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur war of October 1973.

In the very informative fifth chapter, Islamic Devotion, the Arabic version "of the confession (shahada) of Muslims" is rendered: "Ilaha illa Allah. Muhammad rasul Allah." The first Arabic word of the confession is omitted: "La." Without it (a negative particle,) the confession is meaningless. Usually, this brief Islamic credo is prefaced by the Arabic words: "Ash-hadu anna," i.e., I bear witness. The complete Muslim confession states: "I bear witness that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God."

When explaining the beginning of the crusades (1099), the author mentions that a certain "Turkish emir took control of Jerusalem under the aegis of the Ottoman Empire" and "placed difficulties upon the Christian pilgrims." (p. 256) The emir who made it hard for the pilgrims could not have done so with the encouragement of the Ottoman Turks, but of the Seljuk Turks. The first time the Ottoman Turks appeared on the horizon of world history was around 1280, and their impact on the Middle East was not felt until the early years of the 16th century.

These suggested corrections are not meant to detract from the great value of this work. Braswell's ISLAM, with its many excellent features, ends with a ten page glossary of Arabic and Islamic words. Any serious student of Islam will be enriched by owning this book.