

Religion, Law and Society: A Christian-Muslim Discussion, by Tarek Mitri, editor.  
Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995. Pp. 154. \$14.95 (paper)

reviewed by Bassam M. Madany

---

The editor informs us that "this book is the fruit of two Christian-Muslim colloquia convened by the Office on Interreligious Relations of the World Council of Churches." Thirteen Christian and Muslim experts met in Switzerland in 1992 and 1993, to discuss Religion, Law and Society. Their essays appear in this paperback.

Dr. Walid Saif of the University of Jordan, submitted a severe critique of the West. He advanced a theory which has found wide acceptance in the Middle East. It claims that having defeated Communism after several decades of confrontation, the West now needs another enemy. It has found it in Islam. Thus, the insistence on the universality of human rights is nothing but a disguised way of prosecuting a plan to portray Islam as an enemy of freedom and democracy. "To my mind, even to discuss the subject under the label of 'rights of non-Muslims' is misleading and probably counterproductive, because it may imply that non-Muslims in an Islamic state are signaled out as being a special category with a somehow different status." (127)

This essayist claims that Shari'a law has always guaranteed the rights of non-Muslims within the various Islamic empires. Unfortunately such an idealistic interpretation of history does not stand in the light of serious research. For example, within the first Caliphate (661-750 A.D.) equality was not achieved even among non-Arab converts to Islam (Mawalis). This led them to participate in the opposition movements which eventually brought down that Caliphate. As for the Christians and the Jews known as Dhimmis, they could hardly be described as having been treated with any type of equality among their Muslim neighbors. The most forthright presentation of the classical description of how Islam views itself as the highest form of all monotheistic faiths was presented by Dr. Mohammed Ben-Yunusa of Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria:

"There is one true religion coming from the one and the same God to deal with the outstanding human problems of all times. This religion is Islam. But it should be borne in mind that Islam was not taught by the Prophet Muhammad alone. On the contrary, Islam had been taught by all the prophets before Muhammad; and the true followers of Abraham and Moses as well as those of Jesus and the rest were called Muslims. So Islam has been and will continue to be the true universal religion of God, because God is one and changeless and because human nature and major human needs are fundamentally the same, irrespective of time and place, of race and age, and of any other consideration." (80 & 81)

Another essayist representing a more open approach to the subject of the application of Shari'a in Muslim countries, called for a re-consideration of the classical view that ijihad is closed. He is Asghar Ali Engineer, director of the Institute for Islamic Studies in Bombay, India. He points to the contextual nature of both Qur'anic

teachings as well as the various hadiths which were compiled around 100 years after Muhammad's death. Revision of Shari'a laws is necessary today:

"There is no harm in re-emphasizing the urgency of ijihad. The question of co-citizenship, beyond what is stipulated in the dhimmah pact, illustrates what avenues are to be opened and were indeed opened for creative fiqhi thinking or reinterpretation." (49)

Dr. Khaled Ziadeh of the Lebanese University in Tripoli, Lebanon, gave an excellent presentation of the need for the resumption of doing ijihad in Muslim societies, thus not allowing the Islamists to take over the whole field of revival in the Muslim world.

On the whole the Christian participants in the colloquia did not exhibit an attitude towards their own faith similar to the Muslim participants who were unequivocally strong believers in the uniqueness and finality of Allah's revelation (The Qur'an) and the prophethood and mission of Muhammad. In any dialogue between followers of two faiths, respect for the other must be evident, but does that mean that the Christian side must subscribe to a vague notion of Christianity? If this is the sine qua non of contemporaneous dialogues, the results are very disappointing. The Muslims made their case without compromise and expected the other side to take note of their critique of the West (often regarded as the Christian world) and the necessity of treating Muslims respectfully and equitably. But why was the Christian side silent about the status of Christians living within Muslim lands?

For example, Dr. Bert F. Breiner, co-secretary for interfaith relations at the National Council of the Churches of Christ, contributed an essay on Secularism and Religion. He made no specific mention of the Bible as the source of the Christian faith:

"Faith is the conviction that we have a secure basis for facing the large and the small, the ordinary and the extraordinary choices and decisions we are called upon to make. (93) It is this element of transcendence which unites all forms of religious faith, theistic and non-theistic, in distinction from the secularist worldview." (94)

What is most astonishing is the statement that "God in the glorious transcendence and self-sufficient reality of the divine transcendence is not the object of religious knowledge." (99) I am sure that the Muslim participants whose theological tradition emphasizes the transcendence of God would not go that far in claiming that God "is not the object of religious knowledge." After all, for them, God is at least partially known through the ninety-nine "beautiful" names which describe his being and his attitude toward mankind.

The most helpful essay, *State, Religion and Laicite: The Western European Experience* was contributed by Jorgen S. Nielson, the director of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England. The author describes the religious history of Western Europe since 1648 with its various types of church-state relations. The status of Muslim minorities is discussed as well as their degree of acceptance within the European milieu. He looks forward to the rise of some type of co-existence within an emerging pluralistic culture.

The last essay was contributed by Father Thomas Michel, the head of the Office for Islam of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue at the Vatican. It is a very helpful report on the UN Human Rights Conference in Vienna in June 1993. It focused on the Asian-African Interventions at the conference. Many of these nations, mostly Islamic, did not accept the Western definition as set forth by the US delegation: "there must be a single standard of behaviour everywhere in the world. Rights are not relative to particular cultures. We cannot allow cultural relativism to become the last refuge of repression." (131)

As mentioned above, the Muslim side manifested the usual consensus regarding the fundamentals of their faith. Islam is God's final religion, its message is all-encompassing, and its goal is to enable human beings to lead fulfilled lives on earth and to prepare them for eternity. For them, the topic of secularism is purely Western and is attributable to the imperfectness of Christianity.

On the Christian side, one is struck by the absence of a discernible allegiance to the historic Christian tradition as summarized in the Nicene Creed. Furthermore, there was a total silence about the Christian missionary responsibility vis-a-vis the millions of Muslims who have come to settle permanently in Western Europe and the Americas. They are unashamed of the da'wah component of their faith. They realize that their survival as Muslim minorities living outside Daru'l Islam depends not only on keeping their young within the fold, but equally on their exercise of calling their neighbors to consider the claims of Islam as God's final and universal faith.

One final remark. There was a striking one-sidedness in the composition of the membership which took part in the colloquia. The Muslim side was quite representative, as one notices from the List of Contributors. Not so with the Christian side. Apart from the editor, Tarek Mitri, who is an Eastern Christian and holds the position of executive secretary in the WCC's office on Interreligious Relations, all the essayists were Western Christians. The absence of Eastern Christians robbed the discussions from a note of realism which must be present in any real dialogue. After all, it is the Eastern Christians who have lived side by side with their Muslim neighbors for more than a millennium. By not taking part in the dialogue, the impact of such meetings tends to be negligible. A genuine ecumenical spirit requires that Western Christians, living in the relative peace and comfort of their societies, be concerned about the plight of Eastern Christian brothers and sisters who with us, are members of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

---

## Appendix

Shari'a law: The Islamic law which governs all areas of life as based on the Qur'an and the Hadith.

Caliphate: The successors of Muhammad are known as Caliphs; their regimes as the Caliphate.

Fiqh: the science of expounding the Shari'a and its application in the life of Muslims.

Ijtihad: the intellectual and theological endeavor among Muslims in codifying the Shari'a.

Hadith: the account of the sayings and actions of Muhammad as distinct from the Qur'an.

Islamists: a new term used in Western languages to designate radical Muslims.

Da'wah: Literally: calling, propagating Islam as the true faith.

Daru'l Islam: The Muslim world.

---