



Understanding Christian-Muslim Relations

By Clinton Bennett

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Reviewed by Mike Jones

It seems that we cannot watch the news these days without having some knowledge of Islam to help inform our viewing. Whether it's conflict in the Middle East or tensions closer to home we need sources of information that will help us build a foundation from which we can make sense of the rapidly changing world around us. This is especially true for Christians living both here in North America and around the world. Muslims and Christians cross each other's paths each and every day. We need a resource that will help us understand this Christian – Muslim relationship that has developed over the past 1400 years.

In *Understanding Christian – Muslim Relations* Clinton Bennett has produced such a resource. In this book, Bennett focuses on the complicated and somewhat conflicted interaction between Islam and Christianity. He both reviews the history of this interaction and also introduces us to the key figures that have affected the dialogue that has unfolded. He tells the story of early encounters between Muslims and Christian monks. He discusses the many possible influences on the respective scripture and doctrine of both religious traditions.

Bennett offers some analysis of how much progress has been made in the ongoing dialogue between Christianity and Islam. Bennett also names important questions, issues, challenges, and problems that have been identified as a result of these encounters. He discusses the role sacred scripture has in the public and private debates, conversations, and general dialogue. He also identifies people who have held important roles in the various encounters throughout the centuries. Bennett introduces us to and examines the work of theologians such as John of Damascus and John Hick. He discusses the conciliatory, competitive, and confrontational approaches these individuals have taken in their efforts.

Bennett outlines many of the roadblocks to a deeper Muslim – Christian relationship. One of the roadblocks that has to be dealt with is the superiority felt and expressed by people in both religious communities. This superiority has been expressed in many ways, including encounters in which Christian writers have described the historic Muslim world in some pretty unflattering terms.

Another roadblock is the perceived threat experienced by people in both traditions. There is always a suspicion that representatives of each religion are trying to convert their respective counterparts. Much of this stems from the arrogance mentioned earlier. It also emerges as the result of missionary efforts to offer Muslims an alternative to what they believe and live by. Bennett refers to things like the “missionary imperative” and efforts by individuals such as James Dennis to show the Muslims a supposedly better way. This is why people from both traditions may seem guarded when approaching one another.

These roadblocks have prevented us from finding common ground. According to Bennett, common ground does exist and perhaps the best place to find it, surprisingly enough, is in our respective foundational scriptures. Perhaps another piece of common ground is in the historical person of Jesus Christ. Jesus maintains a prominent place in Islam. He is considered a prophet. While this may be different than the Christian understanding of his life among us it is a point of commonality.

For the most part, Muslims have an uneasy relationship with the west. They don't often like what they see coming out of the west but they feel a responsibility to at the very least engage it in some sort of cultural exchange. They don't always understand how we manage our nations and make decisions. They don't see democracy as being an option for their communities and nations. A similar unease can be seen in the Christian world. Many of us buy into the portrayal of the Muslim world as being somehow "dictatorial and undemocratic" (p. 4).

The West has to focus a tremendous amount of energy and attention on listening to Muslims and learning more about the world in which they live. We have to move beyond our blinders and prejudices and pay more attention to the education and preparation we need in order to fully take advantage of future encounters. We have to learn, for example, that force and violence are not the only options available to us whenever we are in conflict with Muslims at home or around the world. Confrontation will not help us develop stronger ties with Islam. It seems that only an inclusive, conciliatory approach will help increase the information flowing between both religions.

Bennett has written a book that is detailed, informative, balanced and touches on both the politically correct and incorrect. He talks about the issues that affect both Christians and Muslims. He raises questions about issues such as Mohamed and morality. He discusses people and situations that have contributed to the conflicted world in which we currently live. There is a wide variety of people who will find this a helpful book. I commend it to everyone wanting to learn more about both Christianity and Islam. I also want to commend it to everyone wanting a deeper understanding of the relationship and developing dialogue between the two.