

# Questions Rooted in Faith and History

BY KURT J. WERTHMULLER

**Can we, as Christians, understand Islam and respect its adherents without compromising our own beliefs? Considering the historic significance of the Middle East to our faith, how can we approach the region's struggles with a biblical and Christ-like perspective? The two books reviewed here are solid stepping-off points for wrestling with questions rooted in faith and history.**

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**V**isit your local bookstore and you will discover a bewildering array of titles on the history of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian relations. The publishing market for such books continues to mushroom, particularly since the events of September 11, 2001, but also as struggles between Israel and Palestine persist. It is increasingly difficult to choose among these resources which vary widely in quality and accuracy. Compounding our confusion are the many dissenting voices of glib 'analysts' who offer media commentary as real, disturbing, and complex events unfold in the region.

How can we understand the historical context of today's Middle East and of the Muslim worldview? We should be prepared to learn that the people of the Middle East are tremendously diverse culturally, economically, and theologically. Though Islam is the predominant religion in the region, Islam is not just the Middle East, or vice versa. Indeed, the majority of the world's Muslims live in Southeast Asia, and much of the Middle East retains Christian communities of tremendous antiquity.

Furthermore, the *histories* of the region's many communities are very

diverse, though this is often ignored in the West. An infamous downside of the 'Orientalist' tradition, which until the late 1970s was the scholarly face of our engagement with the region, is the tendency of Western scholars to portray Islam and the Middle East as synonymous, as a monolithic civilization that is stagnant in its backwardness and thoroughly defined by a static faith with its glory days in the distant past. Sadly, much of what we continue to find in our bookstores and media outlets maintains this Eurocentric and profoundly inaccurate approach.

As Christians we must approach the study of the Middle East and Islam with an additional set of faith-based questions. Since its inception, Islam in part has been defined in historical and theological terms vis-à-vis Christianity, and thus the faiths are inextricably connected. How did our Christian predecessors, and today how should we approach Islam as a faith in relation to Christianity? Can we fully understand Islam and respect its adherents without compromising our own beliefs? Considering the rich historic significance of the Middle East to our faith, how can we best approach the region's struggles with a biblical and Christ-like perspective? All of these questions are both ancient and timely; we have much guidance in our tradition, but they remain complex and unresolved. Thankfully, a growing body of Christian literature challenges us to look beyond the commonly assumed and simplistic answers. The two books reviewed here are ones that I can recommend as solid stepping-off points for wrestling with these questions rooted in both faith and history.

#### REVIEWING A CHECKERED PAST

Rollin Armour's *Islam, Christianity, and the West: A Troubled History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002; 197 pp., \$25.00) sets out to describe the *longue durée* of interaction between Western Christians and the Muslim world, from the origins of Islam to the present. Armour, a Professor Emeritus at Mercer University, focuses on Christian responses—theological, philosophical, political, and military—to the successive forms of Islam. These forms include Islam's fast and broad early conquests, successive dynasties through the Middle Ages, and response to recent challenges to its authority by Western colonialism, modern Zionism, and twentieth-century East/West relations. At its heart, *Islam, Christianity, and the West* is a historical survey of Christian attitudes toward Islam. After nicely touching on the context of a period and place, Armour discusses the main approaches of that era's Christian thinkers and leaders. He is clearly most interested in the Western Christian interaction, and it is in this that he is most effective.

"What were Christians to make of a religion that at one and the same time affirmed and denied basic Christian tenets?" (p. 2). Armour answers by illuminating an impressive sampling of historical trends in Islam and Christianity, which are ripe for comparison—such as early Islamic conceptions of *jihad* (pp. 31-32) and later Christian parallels in the Crusades (pp.

67-68). Armour's message is clear: "Christians failed in their attempts to understand and interpret Islam—unless one considers writing to confirm one's misinformation and prejudice as success" (p. 2). He describes a full spectrum of such prejudices, from the description of Muslims by the medieval "Song of Roland" as bloodthirsty worshipers of three pagan deities (whereas Islam really teaches *staunch* monotheism), to Martin Luther's labeling the advancing Ottoman Turks as demonic servants and an apocalyptic omen (they actually provided remarkable stability to the Middle East and plenty of trade to Western Europe). Armour also includes the few historical exceptions of Christians who at least attempted to approach Islam and Muslims with less antagonism and more understanding, such as Francis of Assisi and Thomas Aquinas. His choice of examples nicely demonstrates the often antagonistic interactions (with a few notable exceptions) between Christianity and Islam.

However, I have two criticisms of Armour's approach. By focusing on the Western Christian perspective, he too often avoids the Islamic 'side' of the discussion. Muslims certainly have pondered Christians and the West over the centuries. A number of Arab-Muslim intellectuals, for example, visited Europe in the mid- to late-nineteenth century for education and training, and returned home with a transformed vision for the future of Islam and firsthand perspectives on the West, both critical and complimentary.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, Armour bases almost all of his exposition on a limited number of secondary sources, such as Bernard Lewis' *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2000 Years* and Karen Armstrong's *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*. Though such surveys are necessary for reference, there is also a wealth of primary sources that would have strengthened this study. When, for example, he refers to a Muslim writer by the name of Usamah who was disgusted by the barbaric behavior of the Christian Franks, Armour references Karen Armstrong's history of Jerusalem (p. 74). Yet a fabulous English translation of Usamah Ibn-Munqidh's original writings is available.<sup>2</sup> A greater inclusion of the historical Muslim perspective, preferably from original sources, would have added a rich dimension to Armour's study.

Despite these limitations, *Islam, Christianity, and the West* is a useful and timely work. We need to be reminded that Christians historically have approached Muslims with willful ignorance and, sometimes, violence. Since understanding our own checkered past can encourage us to be humble and compassionate in our current conversations with Muslims, Armour's contribution in this regard is particularly welcome.

#### **UNDERSTANDING A CURRENT CONFLICT**

*Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told About Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003, 286 pp., \$23.00) is a markedly different book from *Islam, Christianity, and the West*. While

Armour provides a sweeping survey of Muslim and Christian relations, Gary M. Burge, professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, focuses in this volume on the specific context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Burge presses a single question: how should we measure the human cost and historical reality of this tragic conflict from a biblical, Christ-like perspective? His answer is found in this important and illuminating book that is soundly researched, carefully written, and genuinely accessible. Loosely arranged by chronological themes, *Whose Land? Whose Promise?* ranges over discussions of the historical origins of the land of Israel, the ancient communities of Palestine, and the present-day state of affairs in the region.

In his sound biblical interpretation, Burge stresses two central points. First, when the land of Palestine was promised to Abraham's descendants, it was in a *conditional* covenant that connected God's promises to Israel's commitment to justice and obedience (p. 72). Second, it is important to incorporate the New Testament witness in our interpretation of promises regarding the land. "We cannot read the Old Testament and talk about its application today as if the New Testament had never been written," writes Burge (p. 167). He does not mean that the New Testament should replace the Old, but rather argues that Christ, as the fulfillment of biblical promises of salvation, is an *embodiment* of the Promised Land (p. 175).

Burge carefully notes that the Jewish people remain a divinely blessed community with a special place in history, but reiterates that this binds them closer to faithfulness rather than releasing them from accountability. Some critics accuse him of writing an imbalanced book from the "Palestinian side," but a closer look reveals that Burge studies a substantial number of Israeli sources—for example, the work of Israeli historians such as Avi Shlaim and Benny Morris, and the autobiography of Golda Meir. He also acknowledges the many Israelis who have been troubled and prompted to public action by their nation's treatment of Palestinians, referring to the former as the 'prophets' of modern Israel who are calling their people to a higher moral standard (p. 105).

Burge consistently and refreshingly ties each biblical theme to current-day events. He continually reminds us that this is not merely an academic exercise, for our historical and theological interpretations have significant consequences in the present. He prefaces a discussion of the Old Testament

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prophets' concern for justice, for example, with a carefully researched account of a deadly West Bank clash between Jewish settlers and Palestinian villagers in April 1988. He employs a broad spectrum of Israeli, Palestinian, and foreign press reports, as well as personal interviews, in order to be as accurate and objective as possible (pp. 94-98).

One of the most meaningful portions of the book describes the diminishing Christian community of Israel and the Occupied Territories. An entire chapter simply provides brief biographies of several Christian leaders. This may seem out of place in what is otherwise a step-by-step, thematic analysis of the conflict, but it reveals something sorely lacking in both Christian and secular analyses—individual faces and names of Christian people whose entire lives have been shaped by the conflict. Their stories are filled with challenge and steeped in faithfulness. And they are all the more bittersweet in light of the easy manner in which some evangelical organizations working in Jerusalem and 'green line' Israel dismiss any hint of authentic Christian faith among the Palestinians (p. 195).

*Whose Land? Whose Promise?* is a sensitively argued, historically grounded, and biblically sound analysis, which is only strengthened by Burge's interweaving historical and biblical exposition with deeply personal relationships and his own struggles. Though it is an accessible introduction to the complex layers of the conflict, it contains sufficient depth to enrich the perspective of even seasoned scholars for whom 'U.N. Resolution 242' is a familiar a part of their vocabulary. I only hope that this book's provocative title does not ward off many who could be genuinely educated, and indeed changed, by reading it with an open heart and mind.

## NOTES

1 See, for example, Albert Hourani's excellent book, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962; reprinted, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

2 Phillip K. Hitti, trans., *An Arab-Syrian Gentleman & Warrior in the Period of the Crusades: Memoirs of Usâmah Ibn-Munqidh* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

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