

In the last chapter, Kraft presents her conclusion that academic studies in the field of BMBs lives and identity have barely begun, but not before she address one of the most important issues for converts, and that is their children growing up as second generation converts in a Muslim context. The challenges faced by these BMBs to raise their children as Christians are tremendous, as these children are still labelled Muslims by the community, their Muslim family members, school and friends. No wonder that a lot of BMB families decide to leave their countries for non-Muslim countries when they have children. Though originally they may have wanted to stay in their countries, eventually they leave just to protect their children from the pressure and stress of dual identities.

This is a book I not only recommend, but it is a book I identify with, as I feel it was written about my own past problems and my future dreams. If you really want to understand BMBs struggle and hopes, this is one of the few books available that you must read.

Reviewed by Daniel Abraham

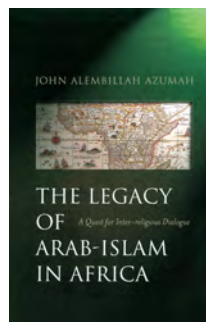
Daniel was born into an Arab Sunni Muslim family in the Middle East and prior to encountering Christ he was a devoted Muslim who sought to persuade Christians to become Muslims. After procuring a Bible to better understand Christian beliefs, the Holy Spirit drew him to Christ as he read it. His journey has included time in the Europe and eventually a move to the USA. Now married and ministering full-time he has many roles including being the webmaster for the Arabic section of www.answering-islam.org.

The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa: A Quest for Inter-religious Dialogue

by John Alembillah Azumah

Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001

John Azumah is Associate Professor of World Christianity and Islam at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, USA (not to be confused with the seminary of Columbia International University in Columbia, South Carolina, USA). Just prior to his recent move to the States, Azumah taught for a few years at the London School of Theology. Originally from Ghana and raised as a Muslim, Azumah has focused much of his scholarly work on Islam in Africa. *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa* began life as his 1998 PhD



thesis under Dr. David Thomas of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, in Selly Oak, Birmingham, in the UK.¹⁷

I believe *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa* is *essential reading* for anyone seeking to understand the history and role of Islam in Africa today.¹⁸ It also shows profound insight into the nature of Islam and its close ties to Arab culture *wherever* it is found. The book consists of four primary chapters as well as a philosophical and methodological introduction and a short concluding chapter. The primary content of the book, chapters two through five, is extremely important for anyone seeking to understand the history of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. Since some readers of this review will be unable to read the book, I will attempt to give an accurate idea of the topics Azumah deals with in his extensive and very illuminating analysis, by describing the themes of each chapter.

Whenever Islam took control of a region it was anything but tolerant to indigenous elements of the local African cultures.

In the preface, Azumah describes the history and nature of much scholarly discussion of Islam in Africa in the past few decades. He also explains why its strong bias towards privileging only the Muslim point of view leads to a serious deficit in scholarly understanding of Islam, Islamic history and expansion in Africa. The central thrust of the book is to challenge ‘the romantic perception of a “glorious Islamic past”’ (xvi) in Africa.

In chapter one, ‘A Glance at Post-Colonial Assessments of the Western-Christian and Arab-Islamic Legacies in ‘Tropical Africa’ (1-23), Azumah sets the context for the book by arguing that post-colonial assessments are badly slanted in favour of Muslim interpretations which seriously distort both the history and interpretation of Islam in Africa. Azumah takes to task the many contemporary scholars who argue that unlike Western Christianity’s negative impact on Africa, Arab-Islam, as it has come to dominate large parts of Africa, has not undermined the African heritage (7). He shows that, on the contrary, African-Muslim scholars not only have NO place for traditional African values, they actually view indigenous African customs as ‘reprehensible and evil’ (8). Whenever Islam took control of a region it was anything but tolerant to indigenous elements of the

¹⁷ *Black-African encounter with Arab-Islam: An African Perspective*. PhD thesis. University of Birmingham, 1998.

¹⁸ More recently Azumah co-edited a book, along with Lamin Sanneh, entitled *The African Christian and Islam* (2013), which looks like a further promising source for deeper understanding of Islam. This book contains 22 of the papers given at a conference held in Ghana in 2010. If anyone would like to read and review this book, for Seedbed, please let me know! I also highly recommend, and have used in a course at Houghton College, Azumah’s general introduction of Islam for Christians entitled: *My Neighbour’s Faith: Islam Explained for African Christians* (2008).

local African cultures (10). One of the topics that he introduces in this first chapter, is that the centuries old Arab-Islamic enslavement of Africans, which predated the European slave trade by centuries and continues up to the present day, has been swept under the carpet and explained away by most Western Islamicists (14-15). In this chapter he also states that one of his primary goals is to help Africans understand more accurately the actual legacy of Islam in Africa, which is rather dark. He wants readers to not be deceived by what he calls the 'sheer academic fundamentalism and intolerance' of the African indigenous values that Islam destroys. Azumah describes this academic insensitivity to African values as being typical of post-modern Western liberal thought (22).

In his second chapter, 'Indigenous Africa as a Cultivating Ground for Arab-Islam' (24-62), Azumah demonstrates that Islam was initially spread in Africa, not by an invading army, but by 'dispersed Muslim professionals, i.e. traders and religious divines' (61). He then shows convincingly that African indigenous culture and religions were generally quite receptive to the arrival of both Muslim and Christians in their midst and that the traditional African order fostered a creative pluralism that absorbed Islam without really having to compromise its own values. This easy acceptance, and initial containment of Islam within traditional African culture, led Muslims to realize that they couldn't gain traction without jihad of the sword, which they then launched and which Azumah deals with in his third chapter.

In chapter three, 'Muslim Jihad and Black Africa' (63-108), Azumah deals ably with the Sunni doctrine of jihad, describes the history of jihad in Africa and analyses the socio-religious and political dynamics behind several jihad campaigns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the process he describes the attitudes that jihadists had toward indigenous African believers and their customs (64-5). He notes that the ongoing jihadist campaigns in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were largely stopped by Western colonial powers (by superior military might) as they sought to set up conditions favourable to their own exploitation. He also shows that the jihadist campaigns were all carried out by African Muslims undertaking them as religious duties. There were no invading outsider Arab or Berber armies. It was Islamic jihad doctrine and the conviction that Africa would never submit to Islam without the sword forcing them to submit, that drove *African* Muslims to seek to conquer and subjugate their fellow Africans in the name of Islam.

The following paragraph gives a flavour of Azumah's style and pointed critique:

If the views and policies of the jihadists towards traditional African believers were to be espoused by, say Western-Christian missionaries or any group in our present day and age, they would be rightly branded religious fascism. If the campaign against traditional believers were to be carried out in any part of the

world today it would be viewed as religious cleansing and the massacres that went with it would be first-class genocide. Cultural genocide and religious imperialism would have been the appropriate terms for their programs of Islamization and Arabization had it been undertaken by any other group. But alas, this was not the case; it was Africans mercilessly enforcing Arab ways of life upon fellow Africans in the name of God! Even more so is the fact that these were carried out by a community of people who thought that their case was made in heaven and should not be questioned (99).

And the implications of these alarming realities for today, is very sobering, as Azumah goes on to state:

What is worrying, though, is that the anti-African, anti-non-Muslim and anti-non-Islam attitudes of the jihadists, plus their desire to follow the Arab model, far from diminishing, is still alive in varying degrees in contemporary African-Muslim thought. The absolute claims of the jihadists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have remained the source of inspiration and exemplar model for the overwhelming majority of present-day African Muslims... (100)

The raids, slaughters, kidnapping, trade and enslavement of millions of traditional African believers by African Muslim societies, as we shall shortly outline, were basically viewed as a religious duty.

Azumah's fourth chapter 'Muslim Slavery and Black Africa' (108-169), is almost a third of the book. He describes, with astute scholarship and documentation, the way that the centuries long Muslim slave trade was so pervasive and destructive

everywhere Islam had power in Africa. With the arguments in this chapter, Azumah arrives at one of the most deeply disturbing parts of his discussion of the influence of Arab-Islam on Africa. He argues convincingly that the thing that distinguishes Muslim slavery from slavery in non-Muslim Africa is that it was backed and justified through a systematic religious and racist rationale (117). Listen to these chilling words:

The main justification of slavery in classical Muslim thought, borne out in practice by generations of Muslims, is non-belief in Islam, *kufir*....

It shall be demonstrated in this chapter that while African Muslims exploited slavery to satisfy mundane economic needs, they also, in line with traditional Muslim thought, sincerely regarded it as an Islamic response to the problem of *kufir*. The raids, slaughters, kidnapping, trade and enslavement of millions of traditional African believers by African Muslim societies, as we shall shortly outline, were basically viewed as a religious duty. (117-8)

This review lacks the space to *present* any of the compelling evidence with which Azumah builds his case in this chapter about the purely *Islamic cause* of Muslim-African slavery. He states his conclusion with remarkable restraint and sobriety, given the horrors of African inhumanity to other Africans in the name of Islam. After fifty pages of detailed description, he concludes:

Muslims, from pious to the nominal, within and without Africa waged jihad, raided, hunted, kidnapped and purchased tens of millions of Africans as slaves and in the process slaughtered and caused the death of tens of millions others....

We established that contrary to theories of a humane Muslim slavery, the institution and practice of slavery in Muslim societies was as cruel and harsh as any other slave system. We established that notwithstanding pious Muslim stipulations about slavery, slaves constituted a class of deprived people with the chains of servitude and caste inferiority riveted on their offspring. They were totally denied civil status, and their exclusion from responsible office was reinforced by the entire weight of Islamic law, Muslim social practice and traditional stigma. (168-9)

In the fifth major chapter, Azumah gives what I believe to be his strongest argument, though I find a frustrating problem at the heart of his argument. In this chapter, 'Encountering the Encounters: Arab-Islam and Black African Experience' (170-229), speaking as an African to his fellow-Africans, Azumah strongly challenges Muslim Africans to critically examine the overwhelmingly negative heritage that Arab-Islam has given to Africa and Africans. Yet Azumah couches his entire devastating critique of Islam in words that appeal for honest and frank dialogue between African Muslims, Christians and members of other religious communities. He appeals to Muslim Africans to be honest and face the evils that Islam has wrought in its path of slavery, jihad and genocide across Africa throughout the centuries. He argues that it is only as *Muslim Africans* face up to and acknowledge the evils and failings of their religious traditions, as Christian Africans have been doing for decades, that they will be able to develop a healthy self-understanding as *Africans*. It will only be with such honest self-understanding, that Muslims living in African communities, which are overwhelmingly a mingling of adherents of Muslim, Christian and traditional religions, will learn to live together harmoniously in multi-religious societies. Azumah argues eloquently that Muslims need to be *critically faithful*, that is, they need to remain faithful to the best in their religious traditions, while at the same time having the maturity to challenge the evils and mistaken values embraced too often at the heart of Islamic ideology and frequently carried out in Muslim practice. They must criticize and reject the subjugation of all non-Muslims merely because they are not Muslims, and African Muslims must learn to live in harmony with fellow Africans who do not accept their religion.

Integrity and conviction in one's inherited traditions are vital elements in dialogue, but so also is self-criticism...

This may be called *critical faithfulness*. Some Muslims have argued with much soundness that critical faithfulness to the Islamic tradition is crucial to the present generation of Muslims if they are to 'reconstruct an Islamic future on an Islamic past' [citing Fazlur Rahman, 1979, *Islam*, 235-54]. Acknowledging the 'missteps' within one's inherited tradition is, first of all, a sign of strength

rather than weakness. This strength of integrity is... crucial for dialogue. Second, critical faithfulness to ones' tradition will, help bring about restorative justice to victims, and prevent the injustices associated with these aspects from repeating themselves... Third, being critically faithful to one's tradition will enable an intelligent appropriation and adaptation of these traditions in contemporary times.

Finally, critical faithfulness will help bring about change in old and preconceived unhelpful attitudes and perceptions so as to promote mutual respect and peaceful co-existence between and among communities. (179-180)

The thing that I find troubling about this noble and indeed, *ennobling* vision for inter-religious community dialogue within Africa, is that *in the same chapter* Azumah demonstrates, *definitively*, that it is virtually impossible for Muslims to

find anything in their traditions that will prove a reliable source for such a peaceable multi-cultural dialogue and peaceful co-existence. Indeed, in citing a few high-minded Muslim would-be reformers, he reminds the reader that such men have normally been executed as heretics. Furthermore, he observes that the Muslim masses instinctively reject such aspirations for peaceable relations with non-Muslims since they are convinced of the divinely

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endowed superiority of Arab-Muslim culture and thus the divine necessity for all non-Muslims to live *under* the oppressive rule of Muslims.

In other words, when it comes down to it, according to Azumah's own analysis in this chapter, and throughout the book, there is really nothing *at the heart of Islamic religious tradition* that would yield the benevolent outcome for which he is calling and hoping. Azumah's account of jihad is a penetrating, well documented and devastating description of the slaughter of millions of Africans by African Muslims. Furthermore, his account of the slavery of tens of millions of fellow non-Muslim Africans, by Muslim Africans, motivated by obedience to Allah as Muhammad taught and exemplified, is a tragic and very sobering centuries-long example of what happens when Muslims are faithful to Muhammad. It is hard for me to understand, therefore, how he thinks that calling Muslims to be *faithful to their traditions* can lead to anything but more of the same. How can faithfulness to the best in Islam mean anything other than seeking to be loyal to Muhammad and the disturbing example he set for all who follow him?

In his short conclusion (230-240), Azumah recounts the argument of his book and reiterates that in this book he has called upon 'African Muslims intellectually to engage the basic African heritage in dialogue' (240). He concludes

with a hopeful tone, yearning for *Muslims* to join in the ongoing dialogues already happening across the continent in which Africans are seeking to more deeply understand and develop their indigenous African heritage and self-understanding. These dialogues with the multiple religious and cultural influences that Africans have received and must understand are helping Africans develop a healthy engagement with outside, non-African influences including those that come from Christianity and Islam.

So, what does one make of this book? First, I come away with profound appreciation for John Azumah's deep love for his African identity and people. Secondly, I have been immensely educated about centuries of African Muslim heritage, of which I had only had a cursory understanding prior to reading this book. Thirdly, my understanding of the complexities and of the urgent need for honest, self-critical dialogue has been significantly shaped. The tone in which Azumah writes communicates far more optimism than I am able to feel as to the potential for Muslims to reform themselves in positive ways through being *critically faithful* to their Islamic traditions. I must say that, for the sake of human flourishing in Africa and beyond, I sincerely hope that I am wrong and that John Azumah has the more accurate read on the capacity of Muslims to reform from within, in dialogue with non-Muslims.

I consider *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa* a *must* read for all who desire to understand African Islam.

Reviewed by Don Little

What's Really Wrong with the Middle East

By Brian Whitaker

Westbourne Grove, London: Saqi 2009. 384 pages

Introduction

This is the kind of book I have always wanted to read, even write, on the Middle East. Brian Whitaker's analysis of the Arab world blends cultural perspectives like those found in Margaret Nydell's *Understanding Arabs* (1987), with the elements of historical classics like Gerald Butt's *The Arabs*.

Whitaker has been a journalist for the British newspaper *The Guardian*¹⁹ since 1987 and was its Middle East editor between 2000 and 2007. He is currently an editor on the paper's 'Comment is free'. He also writes articles for

¹⁹ The Guardian is a politically left of centre British newspaper.