Book Review: The Search for Forgiveness

Reviewed by Elsie Maxwell

THE SEARCH FOR FORGIVENESS. Pardon and punishment in Islam and Christianity, Chawkat Moucarry, IVP, 2004.

The book is based on the dissertation that Moucarry wrote for his doctorate from the Sorbonne in 1994. The title was *Pardon, repentir, conversion: étude de ces concepts en Islam et de leurs équivalents bibliques* (*Forgiveness, repentance, conversion: study of these concepts in Islam and their biblical equivalents*) and it particularly concentrated on forgiveness in the Qur'an. I think this book exhibits the difficulties that come when one tries to turn an academic work into a practical tool for Christians. The reader needs to bear in mind that the author's in-depth study on forgiveness in Islam is not matched by an equal one on biblical forgiveness.

The author has divided the book into four parts:

- Part 1: Forgiveness in God's Attributes
- Part 2: Forgiveness in Theology
- Part 3: Forgiveness in Mysticism
- Part 4: Forgiveness in Ethics.

The first part looks at six divine attributes: God is merciful, forgiving, just, sovereign, patient and returning. Moucarry explains the Qur'anic meaning of these attributes and he takes the majority of his exegesis of the Qur'an from the commentary by Razi (606/1209). His use of only one source as the accepted authority was somewhat of a surprise to me, but this may be more meaningful to him as a Syrian. However, I have been taught to use a wider variety of opinions.

In each chapter, the verses about God's mercy or forgiveness are stated, often with related Hadiths and commentary explanations. The final part of each chapter gives the biblical verses on the topic. But I felt very uneasy with the information, since the words of mercy or justice from the Qur'an were laid out as factual statements. I do see them as essential in the message of the Qur'an. But what do the words mean? What do Christians and Muslims have in common? Do I accept the Qur'anic statements at face value? Is it only a game of semantics? How do I appreciate their understanding of God? I would have preferred to hear the meanings fully discussed, with the ideas unpacked a bit more. Such explanations do occur in *Part 2*. Thus I would recommend reading *Part 2* first as a way to better understand *Part 1*.

I found this second part, 'Forgiveness in Theology', the most useful. First of all, I appreciated the author's grappling with the meaning of the terms. This, for me, is so vital and why I personally would have liked this section to come first. Also, it was good to have the information examined from the perspective of the various communities. I benefited from understanding more fully the Shi'ite views and the different Mu'tazilite schools of thought. The

charts are extremely useful, giving one both a bird's-eye view and help for retaining the information.

Many books often dismiss the Sufi views as irrelevant to general Islamic knowledge, but this one does not. The topic of forgiveness is a primary area of belief, a stage or gateway to reaching unity with God, and thus of great concern for Sufis. The Sufi view comes close to resembling a relational view of God. Christians may find some Sufi thoughts to be disturbing, as it is not easy to fathom the differences. The author states that we need to remind ourselves of the 'risk of confusing selfhood with sin' and 'annihilation in God instead of peace with God' (p. 229). Two chapters are devoted to an overview of Ibn 'Arabi's writings examining this topic.

The final section, 'Forgiveness in Ethics', looks at forgiveness and penal law, and forgiveness in human relationships. Can repentance prevent legal judgments? For many Muslims this possibility exists, but for others it does not. The Muslim community, in following a 'Prophet of Mercy', are expected to demonstrate forgiveness and mercy to one another. (See Sura 24:22 where forgiveness from God requires the believer to forgive others.) A number of issues are discussed where it would seem that Islam has not practiced a forgiving spirit. The challenge is to Christians: are they practicing forgiving others?

A short concluding chapter recaptures the highlights of the book and then closes with that lovely prayer from Bishop Tafti in which he responds with love and forgiveness to the murder of his son. The book includes several useful appendices and an index of the Qur'anic and biblical references.

This is a book well worth reading and owning, although it is not an easy read. It is a useful resource and offers us much to learn. Workers would benefit by reading it for a group discussion where they could unpack together the difficult issues.