

BOOK REVIEWS

Christ in Islam and Christianity, Robinson, Neal, SUNY Press, Albany NY, 1991, 235pp, reviewed by Abe Wiebe

I was drawn to acquire this book by the summary written by the publisher which states: "*Christ in Islam and Christianity* is an analysis of the different approaches to Jesus in the Qur'an and in the classical commentaries. The author presents controversial suggestions about the relevance of the Qur'anic representation of Jesus and Mary to Muhammad and his message. Included are extensive translations of extracts from the classical commentaries including Sunni, Mu'tazilite, Shia and Sufi." (Neal Robinson is Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies, the College of St. Paul and St. Mary, England.) Being especially interested in the questions of Christian-Muslim dialogue, I anticipated that there would be substantial help here with regard to the controversies surrounding Jesus, his person and his redemptive mission to mankind.

The book is divided into seventeen short chapters, well laid out and well written, each presenting a specific aspect of the debate (e.g. Muhammad and the Christians, Jesus' Return: Qur'an 4:159) and concluding with a summary section for further discussion. The first seven chapters, or sixty pages, are very useful as they provide a superb introduction to the topic.

The last ten chapters are much heavier in content and in style. They concen-

trate on how five of the major classical Islamic commentaries, al-Tabari, Zamakhshari, al-Razi, al-Baydawi, and Ibn Kathir, treat key questions relevant to the person of Jesus Christ. The questions under discussion are Jesus' Return, The Crucifixion, The Meaning of *Tawaffa*, The Interpretation of *Shubbiha la-Hum*, The Creating of birds from Clay, the Raising of the Dead, and The Virginal Conception. Each subject is considered as cited in the Qur'an and then as interpreted by the above list of authorities.

Unfortunately, I found little that could be of help in the exchanges that I inevitably have with my Muslim friends. What Robinson presents is for the most part an expansion of the Qur'anic text and teaching about Jesus from the standpoint of the understanding of the classical commentators. He is obviously a competent Islamic scholar with a firm grasp of both Arabic and the Qur'an. His unwritten conclusion is that there is no allowance in the classical commentaries for anything close to a biblical interpretation, if indeed they would even understand such.

Personally, I was disappointed that Robinson did not seek to introduce a stronger Christian analysis. Biblical references are rare and there is little attempt made to point out inconsistencies in Islamic reasoning or to demonstrate how the whole of the Qur'anic foundations are at variance with the Scriptures. In this light the title of the book is a misnomer. It would be more

accurate to simply refer to the work as "Christ in Islam". We are left with the conclusion that the Muslim polemicists and commentators began with the unquestioned dogma that the Qur'an was entirely accurate and that the Christian Scriptures were false. This is hardly surprising. We may share such an outlook in reverse order. But it remains for someone other than Robinson to show us how to move from such a position to effective interaction in open-hearted love with our Muslim friends created in God's image and worthy of His grace.

***Why I am not a Muslim*, Ibn Warraq, Prometheus Books, N.York, 1995, 360 pages, reviewed by Abe Wiebe**

Never have I read a book that is so openly critical of Islam, its tenets, its culture, its history and its influence on today's world. Writing under an obvious pseudonym, Ibn Warraq, who now lives and teaches in Ohio, plunges right into his thesis from the very first pages. His observations are well supported, his analysis is without apology and his attacks against Islam are daring and well aimed. Much of his writing is frankly brutal. If you agree with him, you can only conclude that the world would be much better off had Islam never existed.

Ibn Warraq postures himself as an open-minded crusader in favour of a society governed by intellectual secularism and producing a thoroughly humanistic culture. To quote the author himself, "human reason or rationality is the ultimate arbiter of rights," communal and individual. By

this he means rights in all the diverse areas of human endeavour or behaviour, be they religion, governance or human relationships, be they in a pagan, Christian, Jewish or Muslim context. The mind is the only avenue through which there is any hope of finding an equitable understanding of man's existence. Therefore, it is not surprising that he draws his sword repeatedly against 'revealed truth' or imposed religious structures. These, he claims, are the cause of the world's woes. Actually the title of the book is a misnomer. It should have read, "Why I am not a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew or anything similar."

To my way of thinking the book merits as full-blown exposure in the media as the publication of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. But the western media has long since decided to play it safe when confronting Islam. Things might get nasty, so why look for trouble.

The first hundred pages, along with the concluding chapter, are the main carriers of Ibn Warraq's ideas. He first chastises the uncritical thinking of the western experts. Then he reviews the origins of Islam, highlighting the serious problem of the insufficient credible sources needed to substantiate what Muslims and Orientalists have been telling us about how Islam arose and how the Qur'an was constituted. He agrees with Wansbrough, Cook and Crone, a trio of orientalists who hold that Islam grew as much out of the traditions and collective efforts of the Muslim teachers of the 8th and 9th centuries as out of the direct revelations