

## **Understanding Islam: A Guide for the Judaeo-Christian Reader**

*Jerald F. Dirks*

*Beltsville, MD: amana publishers, 2003. 394 pages.*

Amidst the current struggle to accurately apprehend and explain Islam, various works have appeared since the 9/11 tragedy. Into this array of publications comes Jerald Dirks, who offers his contribution as an attempt to present an undistorted introduction to Sunni Islam based almost exclusively on the Qur'an and the Sunnah and aimed primarily at the western Christian reader. Dirks is an American Christian convert to Islam who has written on such diverse topics as clinical psychology, Arabian horses, and, recently, inter-religious issues: *The Cross and the Crescent: An Interfaith Dialogue between Christianity and Islam* (amana publications: 2001) and *Abraham: The Friend of God* (amana publications: 2002).

Divided into ten chapters, *Understanding Islam* attempts to outline Islam's beliefs, doctrines, and practices in a manner accessible to the average non-Muslim western reader. One could offer a broader outline, noting that chapters 1 to 3 deal with the basic history of Islam unfolded through prophetic history; chapters 4 to 6 cover the faith's sources, doctrines, and rit-

uals; and chapters 7 to 9 focus upon the singular issue of jihad, its meaning and applications as “war” within the teachings of Islam and in wider history. The final chapter acts as a simple summary and exhortation to learn more through recommended Qur’an translations and other materials.

The introduction discusses Islam’s two primary sources, the Qur’an and the Sunnah, along with the overall purpose and preview of the book’s contents. This is followed, in chapter 2, by a systematic comparative summary of such major pre-Islamic events as creation and God’s revelation through His prophets. Here, the author compares and contrasts Islamic, Christian, and Jewish accounts, including such non-Biblical sources as the pseudepigraphal and the apocryphal writings. The third (and longest) chapter, covering roughly a third of the book, introduces Prophet Muhammad, his life and call to prophecy through to the Makkan and the Madinan periods, and ends with his death. Dirks tries to locate Muhammad’s coming within the Jewish and Christian scriptures and tries to focus on issues that a western reader might be biased against, such as the Prophet’s multiple marriages and the treatment of Madinah’s Jewish tribes. He acknowledges more than once the inadequacy of covering Muhammad’s life in such a brief chapter, and therefore refers interested readers to more complete biographical accounts.

In chapters 4 through 6, the author presents an amplified introduction to the Qur’an and the Sunnah, including some discussion of the Hadith collections. The articles of faith and the five pillars cover the standard lists found elsewhere. Dirks does provide an extended discussion on the identity of Abraham’s sacrificial son (Ishmael versus Isaac); however, early Islamic thought was not as unanimous on this issue as he maintains.

The remainder of the book deals with jihad, which Dirks indicates is a personal concern. In chapter 7, jihad is introduced and defined as striving and exhortation as opposed to holy war. However, the author introduces the concept of jihad-as-war in the next chapter by discussing the permissibility, authority, and limits of such warfare. In the final section on jihad, chapter 9, he seeks to soften the previous discussion by comparing the early Islamic conquests with the Crusades and Saladin’s eventual response.

As an academic work, the book is incomplete in several areas, among them the lack of an index, insufficient references to the sources used for Muhammad’s life (e.g., Hadith and *sirah* accounts), and the tendency to present an overly simplified and homogeneous view of Muslim beliefs. Dirks seems either unaware of, or unwilling to mention, the fact that classical and early medieval Islamic thought was not so dogmatic on the issues of *tahrif*, the crucifixion of Jesus, or even the identity of Ishmael as Abraham’s

sacrificial son. Aside from minor editorial mistakes, such as incorrect citations to earlier sections of the book (pp. 101, 102), which are at best disappointing, there is a distinct absence of an objective approach to the topic.

The book's purpose is to present an undistorted introduction to Sunni Islam for primarily Christian readers. While this is an excellent goal, one needs to respect the reading audience and its beliefs. In a work of this nature, comparisons must be made between faiths. One would have hoped that this would be done without *a priori* dismissing the audience's beliefs as false. Unfortunately, an "observant Christian" would, quite naturally, take offence at such a position, and thus Dirks risks losing his audience. In this situation, one would recommend other more suitable works, such as Fazlur Rahman's *Islam* (University of Chicago Press: 1979), Badru Kateregga and David Shenk's *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* (Eerdmans, 1981), or Mahmoud Ayoub's *Islam: Faith and History* (Oneworld Pubs.: 2005).

However, if this book is read without undue academic expectations, some of these aforementioned criticisms become less of a problem, except perhaps for the issue of objectivity. One may also venture to ask why so much importance is given to jihad, while such subjects as Islamic law or women and Islam are absent. Western readers would likely desire to understand these latter issues, particularly as each can be discussed from the twin sources of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. But perhaps this exceeded the author's purposes.

The work's real strength lies in its many references to the Qur'an and the Sunnah, from which the Muslims' beliefs and practices are drawn. Its chief use would be to better understand how some Sunni Muslims view their own faith and, in contrast, that of Christians. In this way, students of comparative religion could find this work both useful and valuable.

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