

The Nearest in Affection: Towards a Christian Understanding of Islam

By Stuart Brown. Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1995.

I fully agree with Stuart Brown that many conflicts between Christians and Muslims occur because of misunderstandings due to both parties' ignorance of each others' beliefs and, in some circumstances, the deliberate misrepresentation of both faiths by their members. I also fully agree that people have to work hard within their community and use their abilities to resolve any conflicts that arise in a very peaceful manner. However, many atrocities that have been committed throughout the world should not be attributed to religion *per se* but to those who use religion and abuse the ignorance of their people about religion for worldly gains.

As regards this book, the first question that comes to my mind is, for whom did Brown write this book? I fail to understand how the contents of this book can help Muslims or Christians understand each other in a better way. First of all, the book's language is not for the layman. Second, anyone who reads this book must have an extensive knowledge of Islamic history in order to grasp the author's points. This book was not written for persons with little or no knowledge of Islam (whether Muslim or Christian). In order for one to understand the concept of this book, one has to have knowledge of both religions. A large portion of the book has nothing to do with its title "The Nearest in Affection." Most importantly, I have never read a book that does not provide references. I could not confirm many statements made by the author. In my opinion, this book will cause more confusion for non-Muslims than it will help them to understand Muslims.

A few specific statements need to be clarified or corrected. For example, Brown explains that "Arabs held that it was Isma'il who lay on the altar." The correct statement is that Muslims believe this, because there are many non-

Muslim Arabs and many non-Arab Muslims who believe that Isma'il lay on the altar. Regarding the question of which son of Abraham lay on the altar, I highly recommend that the author read *Muhammad in the Bible* by Jamal Badawi.

Brown stresses that the message of Islam was directed toward particular people: Muhammad was "commanded him to transmit God's urgent message to the people of Arabia." There are two points that should be considered: 1) According to Muslims, the message of Islam, as well as the Messenger, are universal. The message was not directed toward any particular group, nation, or tribe; and 2) The very first verses of the Qur'an were not directed toward any particular group. There are many writers who make the same mistake, believing that the Messenger and the message were only for Arabs. However, such a belief is contradictory to the very essence of Islamic teaching.

Many non-Muslim western writers love to write about marriage in Islam, especially polygamy, but I personally have not seen one who is fair about it. Brown mentions that Prophet Muhammad "married more than the prescribed maximum of four wives," a very misleading statement indeed, for it suggests that the Prophet did not obey God's revelation. The statement needs more elaboration: What were the reasons and circumstances that caused the Prophet to marry more than four wives? The reason given by the author is not satisfactory. Moreover, the author does not provide any explanation as to why a woman cannot marry more than one husband at a time. His statement will mislead his readers and leave them with unanswered questions.

The most disturbing statement made by the author relates to Muslims living under non-Muslim authority. He writes: "Muslim subjects should try to persuade their governor to grant them freedom to practice their faith and if this fails, (Muslims) should resist such authorities and seek to overthrow them." It should be noted here that when Muslims were persecuted in Makkah, they moved to Madinah in order to live a peaceful life. They did not try to overthrow Makkah's ruling tribes. The author's statement suggests that if Muslims do not get what they want, they will seek violence.

The author tries to draw an analogy between Islam and Christianity. For example, he explains that: "The suffering of imams helps to redeem the ummah On the last day, it is the imam who will intercede for loyal Shi'is." There are many verses of the Qur'an that contradict the above statement. The author needs to provide documentation for his claims. It is interesting that this statement sounds more like the perceived role of Jesus in Christianity. Furthermore, he does not distinguish between what leaders in Islamic countries have done in the name of Islam and the position of Islam. One has to separate what Islam is and what other kings or leaders say about Islam. We often read, in the history of Islam, that many governments either in the past or present have used Islam for their personal gain.

Brown believes that the Prophet did not change the customs of Arabia. In his words: "Mohammed did not greatly change the received sunnah." If the author is referring to marriage in Islam, then he should study marriage before and after Islam. The difference between the two is like the difference between night and day. Millions of Muslims try to follow the Prophet's tradition regardless of where they may come from. Most surprisingly, the author makes a statement that "Al-Shafi'i . . . sought a synthesis of the schools which could serve as a universal shari'ah." This is the first time I have read that al-Shāfi'ī wanted to create a universal shari'ah! I would like to see the author's documentation.

Divorce is another subject area that most non-Muslims like to talk or write about without being objective. In order to be fair, anyone who writes about any subject in Islam either has to be very thorough or not mention it at all. The way that the author has written about divorce totally confuses any reader and does not explain many aspects of the subject matter.

The term *holy scholars* is not an Islamic concept, and the author contradicts himself in this regard. He mentions that there is no priesthood in Islam; therefore, using the words *holy scholars* will infer that Muslims see their religious scholars the same way that Catholics see their *holy fathers*, which is simply not true.

In many passages of the book, I could not tell if the author was paraphrasing or voicing his own opinion. This book gives a great deal of "information" about Islam, but there are no references to verify any of it. The book's title does not relate to many sections of the book, and its language, although very impressive, is not simple enough for most readers. The author writes about such complex subjects as divorce, marriage, inheritance, and sects, but does not take time to explain them in terms of beliefs in detail. The information focuses on fringe movements, obscure persons, and blatantly un-Islamic attitudes. There is little discussion of what Islam really teaches, the commonality of our beliefs, and the brotherhood of humanity that is at the core of Islam. Muslims are portrayed as well-meaning but confused and bickering relics from the dark ages that desperately need the "light" of Christianity. The Qur'an is portrayed as a work borrowed from the Christians, the Jews, and even the Greeks. The Sunnah and hadith are portrayed as shaky, unreliable, and a convenient tool to be used by anyone seeking power. Anyone who does not have basic Islamic knowledge will have a negative impression about the position of Islam on the subjects discussed, and anyone who has Islamic knowledge will question the motives of the author.

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