

Islam is a faith embraced by a billion people worldwide. It has been claimed that, in the United States, the religion of Islam is perhaps the most misunderstood of the major Western faiths. Due in part to this misunderstanding, followers of Islam – Muslims – are often targets of discrimination. This book by Christopher Hewer takes on the almost Herculean task of attempting to explain Islam to an audience that has been primarily educated in western Judeo-Christian culture and has little, if any, knowledge of the history and precepts of this faith.

This book is needed in a world filled with daily news stories that link Islam to violence and terror. The author does not attempt to tackle the modern social and political controversies that are connected to the actions and beliefs of some followers of this faith. For example, the words “Islamism” (a popular reform movement advocating the reordering of government and society in accordance with laws prescribed by Islam) and “Islamist” (a fundamentalist who follows Islamism) do not appear in this work. Jihad is defined as “to struggle on the path to God to establish goodness and to root out evil and oppression.” This includes both one’s personal struggle and the larger struggle of Muslim society as a whole. Each is explained in its historic context, but they are not followed into the modern political/military scene and the actions of suicide bombers who claim to be following jihad as their actions claim countless lives. Islam is more than this current unrest. This work examines older and deeper meanings and practices. To pass a negative judgment on this work as some reviewers have done because of this omission would be like denouncing a Catholic catechism because it does not speak to the abuses of the Crusades or the Inquisition. Yes, there have been political movements that have grown from Muslim belief but to truly understand these movements, one must first understand the underlying beliefs of Islam. That is what Hewer’s work makes possible.

Hewer is described as an expert in Christian-Muslim relations and is currently Fellow in Christian-Muslim Relations at St. Ethelburga’s Centre in London, England. Interestingly, his short bio on the book’s dust jacket explains that he did “undergraduate work in Christian Reformation Theology” and that he “holds a Master’s Degree in Islamic Studies,” but there seems to be no information as to where he pursued these studies or his obtained his degrees. He is also referred to as Dr. Hewer, but no mention is made of his having received a doctorate and, again, no institution is cited. Since knowledge of the author’s academic preparation can be helpful in placing this work in context, it should be known that he earned his PhD in 1998 and a post-graduate diploma (2003) from the University of Birmingham (Centre for the Study of South Asian Religions and Christianity University). He has also completed a number of graduate degrees and attained Postgraduate Certificates in Inter-religious studies and in Open and Distance Education. His credentials alone place him among a very elite group with the ability present a balanced view of Islam and of its relations with Christian belief. He is currently a member of the Al-Mahdi Institute. Established in 1993, the institute seeks to students with a structured degree course in the field of Arabic and Islamic sciences within a multi-cultural and pluralist society.

It must be noted that this book does an excellent job being what it says it is...an introduction. That does not mean that those with some knowledge of Islam will not learn from it, from such points as an explanation of the acceptance of Islam of science (rather than the friction that sometimes exists between scientific findings and the teachings of other religions). There is a clear explanation of the differences between Sunni and Shi’a Islam and the variety of Muslim movements found today in America and Europe. Islam is not as unified as some would present when it comes to interpretations of the Quran. This work shows the reader that there are, in fact, many different interpretations of Muslim thought and interpretation if Islam’s sacred writings.

In the chapter titled “Muslims in the United States (contributed by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith) there is a very clear identification of the roots of the African-American Muslim movement (beginning with the teachings of Noble Drew Ali (originally named Timothy Drew) in Newark, New Jersey in 1913. It lays out the differences between the teachings presented in African-American Islam and those of traditional branches of Islam. It does so in a way that does not “take sides” in any of the theological/political differences. The result is a balanced presentation that only enhances this volume’s role as an “introduction” to this area of study.

This work literally starts “In the beginning...” starting with the Muslim perspective on creation. Additional chapters discuss: the life of Muhammad (and the Sunni and Shi’a views on succession), the Qur’an, a brief history of Islam and its empires, the central beliefs and practices of Islam (perhaps the most immediate useful of all the material in this work), the requirements of a Muslim life, the relationship

of Islam to other faiths including some not typically discussed in other works, such as Sikhism and Baha'i. There are some beautiful photographs that give a visual perspective to the work along with charts that offer helpful illustration of some of the important relationships (such as one on page 169 showing a Muslim classification of religions).

The author, after cautioning readers to be critical of websites and of translations that may or may not be accurate or in accord with the original intent of the document/book, does offer some sources for additional study. There are 7 websites listed and an extensive list of suggested readings (containing sources for translations of the Qur'an in English). There is also a most helpful glossary of key terms and a link to further study materials – www.understandingislamtext.com.

It might be worthwhile to review the performance of some of the reviewers of this book. One was most critical of the book's failure to denounce the violence that some extremists have committed in the name of Islam. Such a discussion is clearly beyond the scope of this work so that criticism is off base. It would be similar to giving a negative review to a Christian Credo for failing to denounce the Inquisition or the Crusades. Another reviewer seemed to focus a bit too much on minor points. In that review it was said that the Mosque in Iowa (mentioned as America's first by Hewer) was not the first mosque. The reviewer stated that a mosque in Fargo, North Dakota was actually the first. While it is accurate that there was an organized prayer group in Fargo, North Dakota, there was no religious structure that could be defined as a mosque. The point may come down to the definition of a mosque, but it is a distraction from the main focus of the work. Prayer and the methods by which it is carried out are important; the building – although important – is secondary to those practices.

Most Muslims are trying to live life according to the teachings of Islam in a complicated, and often times strongly secular, world. Most are far from being fanatics and are typically moderate, religious Americans. This book by C.T.R. Hewer is an excellent way to get to know these people. Knowledge of their basic beliefs and practices can help put the teachings and actions of the extremists (on all sides of this issue) into proper perspective. It can also avoid a greater misunderstanding of, and overreaction to, this religion and to its growing influence on modern life.

— REVIEW BY: Robert G. Stevenson, Mercy College, NY for *Illness, Grief, and Loss*