

Ruthven, Malise. *Islam in the World*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006

Islam in the World by Malise Ruthven is a comprehensive treatment of Islam, stretching from the early history to the post 9/11 world. Ruthven, an Irish writer and journalist who received a doctorate in social and political sciences from Cambridge, has written extensively on Islam and is a widely trusted authority.

Islam in the World begins with an explanation of the Hajj, one of the most important events in the life of a Muslim. Ruthven allows his readers to glimpse behind the curtain of this most sacred event, from the dangers of the trip to the stoning ceremony and call to prayer. He also reveals how the Hajj impacts Saudi Arabia, the host, and discusses its political dimensions. Since the source of Islamic law is the Quran, the holy book, and the Hadiths, non-Quranic teachings and experiences from Muhammad's life, he describes pre-Islamic Arabia, the times of the Prophet, and the earliest years of the movement. Unlike Hodgson, Ruthven does not provide a comprehensive chronology but instead approaches Islam topically, using history to explain his points. Unlike many writers, Ruthven includes some things about Muhammad which antagonize modern readers. He is forthright about Muhammad's propensity to violence¹ and his many wives.²

While Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of Christianity, the Quran is the centerpiece of Islam. While the Bible is written in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic and Christians believe that vernacular translations hold the same authority as the earliest manuscripts, the Quran was written in Arabic and Muslims hold that only the Arabic versions are authoritative.³ Unlike Greek, Arabic defies concretization, making it difficult to understand and making interpretations fluid,

¹Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 40.

² Ibid., 63-5.

³ Ibid., 82.

especially to Westerners.⁴ Many of Ruthven's statements about the Islamic view of God could easily be found in a Christian systematic theology. However, the Muslim denial of original sin is a major difference.⁵ Another difference that Ruthven points out is the statement that "no one shall suffer for another's guilt", thus rejecting the Christian doctrine of substitutionary atonement.⁶

Ruthven does a good job describing the political and legal sides of Islam, a key difference between the religion of the Prophet and the religion of the Messiah. His treatment of Hadith, Sharia and fiqh is complete and insightful. However, his statement that the early conquests were Arab and not Muslim, thus trying to protect Islam from the charge that it was spread by the sword, is false – only when the Arabs became Muslims did they overrun their neighbors. Even if it were true, it makes a distinction without a difference, because at this point in history these people were inseparably Arab and Muslim. The fact that Christian Arab joined in the conquest only proves that they wanted spoils and victory as well. That those Arabs were not treated as dhimmi only proves that the Muslim Arabs expected their Christian Arab brethren to join their ranks soon anyway. By and large, they did. The few that did not ended up as dhimmi. The conquest was both Arab and Muslim.⁷

His argument that the difference between Christianity and Islam is not in the fusion of religion and politics is also weak.⁸ Islam seeks political and religious hegemony, while Christianity asks only that people become disciples of Jesus. Though Christianity became

⁴ Ibid., 91.

⁵ Ibid., 106.

⁶ Ibid., 113.

⁷ Ibid., 126.

⁸ Ibid., 141-2.

Christendom after the conversion of Constantine, Jesus was totally non-political and He made it clear that His kingdom was not of this world. Muhammad's was. Early believers, in stark contrast to early Muslims, were also non-political. Though the Church later merged religion and politics, at least through the 17th century, Christianity as constituted is not political. Therefore it can thrive in any and every political environment.⁹ The results of this difference are stark. In the first 300 years of Islam, Muslims spilled the blood of others. In the first 300 years of Christianity, Christians had their own blood spilled.

One of Ruthven's most compelling arguments is that Muslims struggled to switch to modernism because of the lack of a corporate "person" in Sharia. Such an encompassing entity, typified by "the Church" in Christianity and legally treated like a person with independent interests, gave rise to other entities like guilds in Europe.¹⁰ His discussion of sects from the Kharijīs to the Shia is excellent. Ruthven's differentiation between Christianity as a religion of love and Islam as a religion of justice rings true,¹¹ and he uses that fact to segue into practitioners of mystical Islam, the Sufis.

The challenge from the West shook Islam to the core. With no real separation of spiritual and secular, the failure of political Islam casts the truth of the whole system, political and religious Islam, into doubt. In areas where science and the Quran disagree, for those who believe that the Quran is divine, science loses the battle. This conflict lies at the heart of the identity crisis in the Muslim world to this day. It impacts all aspects of life, including science, education, and women's issues.

⁹ Ibid., 284.

¹⁰ Ibid., 167-70.

¹¹ Ibid., 219-20.

Conclusion

Islam in the World is a fascinating and excellent book on the Faith of the Prophet in the modern day. While some areas are weak, and Ruthven does not have a clear understanding of Christian teachings, it is overall well worth the read.