

BOOK REVIEW

*Opening the Qur'an: Introducing Islam's Holy Book.* By Walter H. Wagner. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008. 547 pp. \$30.00 ISBN 978-0-268-04422-0.

For most people – non-Muslim theologians included – most of what they know about the Qur'an often comes from media “sound bites” that highlight certain passages, especially those that might be controversial to non-Muslims. Such passages, whether shared in oral or written form, are often taken out of context from the texts that precede and follow them. Hence, many individuals might have a skewed perspective on the Qur'an, depending on which passage was highlighted and what was said about it.

Walter Wagner's book is a comprehensive examination of the Qur'an: how it came to be, what it has to say about various topics, and its relevance today. Wagner is a Christian and an adjunct professor of history and biblical studies at Moravian College, Moravian Theological Seminary, and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. His expertise in history and biblical studies is clearly evident in the scholarly, yet sensitive, manner in which he approaches the Qur'an.

The book is divided into three well-organized parts. The first part, “Approaching the Qur'an,” provides background information on the basic narratives of Judaism and Christianity before presenting the basic narrative of Islam. As certain persons are important in all three religions (e.g., Noah, Abraham, Moses), this information promotes understanding of certain Quranic passages. Wagner does an excellent job in helping readers appreciate the geographical setting, the historical time, and the religious atmosphere in which the first Muslim community was established. Especially noteworthy is the conflict between that community and neighboring peoples who rejected Muhammad's claims of revelation, resulting in persecution of Muhammad and the early Muslim community.

Also enlightening is information on the structure of the Qur'an and how its passages are interpreted. Unlike many Jewish and Christian biblical scholars who use various modern literary techniques in the interpretation of their own texts, Muslim scholars do not do so, as they believe that the Qur'an is the inerrant, literal word of God. Wagner's ability to contrast the various approaches of scripture scholars to their particular texts might be eye-opening to non-Muslims who are accustomed to debates as to how a particular passage should be understood within their own faith traditions.

The second part of the book, "The Qur'an Opened," reviews particularly cherished Quranic passages, the Qur'an's view of the Day of Judgment and the hereafter, the role of women, justice, *jihad*, and Jews and Christians, the other "people of the Book." This part provides a number of corrections to what non-Muslims believe the Qur'an says. In the interest of space, only one (*jihad*) will be mentioned, as it has become a frequently mentioned term in media-presented stories about the Middle East, Muslims, and Islam.

The root of *jihad* "connotes striving, endeavoring, being in earnest, power, ability, struggle, and fighting. Most of the [41] references in the Qur'an do not deal with an obvious call to Muslims to wage war or to fight" (368-9). This is a far cry from what certain media reports would have non-Muslims believe. Further, "God's plan for this world requires *jihad*, but not all *jihads* involve violence, killing, and war" (373). According to Wagner, only 10 of 41 do (369).

The book's third part, "The Ever-Open Qur'an," reviews the challenges the Qur'an poses to the world and vice-versa. In this part, Wagner highlights several current Muslim reformers and scholars to demonstrate the variety of thought within Islam.

"Muslims are wary, however, of un-Islamic innovations that will corrupt the Faith and the Faithful" (402). Throughout the ages, Muslims have been betrayed by their own political leaders and by foreigners who claimed to be their friends. Many devout Muslims came to the conclusion that the ways of the world could not bring them security; only adherence to the Qur'an could, and the closer the adherence to God's word, the more genuinely secure they would be.

Consequently, some Muslim leaders call for a radical return to Islamic-influenced governments; in their criticisms, such leaders can be as hard on Muslim governments as on non-Muslim governments. "The fruits of Western culture are valuable, but the selfish principles of capitalism, imperialism, and idolatry are to be totally and, if necessary forcibly rejected" (412). On the other hand, other Muslim leaders opt for a more measured, non-violent approach to reform Islam from within as well as to work with non-Muslims.

The Qur'an reveals that Islam does not seek to obliterate previous faiths but fulfills them.... The centuries during which Christians and Muslims lived together are models for how Christians and Muslims can think, work, serve, and join together to build a moral, just, and peaceful society. (421)

Although Wagner's book would be of greatest use to students of theology and theologians, especially those interested in interfaith relations, his writing style makes this book accessible to interested non-theologians as well. In fact, with the exception of the first chapter (which seems a bit too dense as an opening

chapter), the rest of the book was very engaging, as Wagner patiently explained unfamiliar terms and concepts. For this reader, there was a refreshing lack of the kind of arcane information that most readers do not need but authors like to include in order to demonstrate their own knowledge. Yet, the notes for each chapter and the bibliography *are* exhaustive, so that any reader who wants to learn more is certainly provided with the resources to do so. Wagner has included three appendices (biblical figures mentioned in the Qur'an, traditional names and order of the various *surahs* (or chapters) of the Qur'an, and a glossary of foreign terms), all of which are excellent.

To his credit, Wagner notes areas of disagreements about certain texts or Islamic practices, but he refrains from inserting his own opinions throughout the book. His fair treatment of the Qur'an can encourage non-Muslims to better understand the relevance of the Qur'an in today's world, an important endeavor since so many citizens of the world live according to its message.

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