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Arabic Christian Theology: A Contemporary Global Evangelical Perspective

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Arabic Christian Theology: A Contemporary Global Evangelical Perspective

Abstract

Andrea Zaki Stephanous, *Arabic Christian Theology: A Contemporary Global Evangelical Perspective*, Zondervan, 2019 (ISBN 978-0-310-32026-5), 493 pp. \$34.99.

Keywords

Andrea Zaki Stephanous, Magdi Sadiq Gendi, Riad Aziz Kassis, Ghassan Khalaf, Makram Naguib, Mary Mikhael, Youssef Samir

Cover Page Footnote

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Summary

The Arabic Christian Theology: A Contemporary Global Evangelical Perspective is an edited volume book composed of seven articles written in English by seven Arab theologians. The Old Testament (OT) is the dominating topic of the book. Two particular articles are dedicated to the objections to the OT, "Arab Christians and the Old Testament" and "The Concept of The Covenant in Evangelical Thought." The writer of the former article, Majdi Gendi, answers objections about God choosing Israel and causing violence and wars to the neighboring nations. Over time, this objection has led the Christian Arabic community to ignore the OT, claiming that the God of the OT is different from the NT (p. 12). Gendi answers this objection by focusing on God's attributes. Riad Kassis, the writer of the second article, concentrates on covenant theology by first listing the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New Covenant. He then emphasizes the concepts of contract, condition, and legal agreements (Kassis, 62). By introducing covenant theology, Kassis intends to help Christians develop a better relationship with God and better awareness of the doctrines of salvation, grace, works, and God's acts as demonstrated in the two testaments.

The longest article in the book, written by Ghassan Khalaf, is titled "Jesus and Judaism." In it, the author summarizes the objections to Jesus's ethnicity and cultural identity, which have led some Arab Christian scholars to consider Jesus as a Syrian, a Palestinian, or even a Phoenician instead of a Jew. Khalaf provides biblical, historical, and theological answers to the questions of Jesus's cultural identity and points out that the real problem between Jesus and his Jewish peers was not cultural in nature but was instead related to his messianic claims and biblical teaching. "Jesus himself was the problem," says Khalaf, "and his statement that he was the Messiah and the Son of Man was the point of no return when they passed judgment on him (Mark 14:61-62)" (Khalaf, 169).

In a subsequent article, Makram Naguib introduces the issues of religion and politics. He writes about one of the Middle East's most sensitive topics: the Zionist trends and the radical evangelicals and how the Arabic view differs radically from the American view because of generalization, lack of discernment, and the fallacy of millenarianism. He includes seven principles of biblical interpretation and applies them to prophetic texts to help the readers understand how Arab theologians understand the apocalyptic texts.

The book also includes an Arabic perspective on "The Christian Woman," written by Mary Mikhael. In her article, she plainly addresses the challenges of Christian women and church leadership. She details the Islamic belief about women's role in family and society, and women's constitutional status in several Arabic countries. She communicates how they have negatively affected the view of women in Arab churches and undermined her potential in ministry. Along similar lines, Youssef Samir provides an Eastern perspective about "The Cross and the Power Issue." In his article, he provides an Eastern model for understanding the cross of

Christ and what it has to offer to the relationship between the ruler and the governed, the shepherd and the parish, the father and the family, the leader and the led, and the authority and the people. Finally, Andrea Zaki Stephanous, the editor of the book, writes about “Culture and Identity,” examining the role of religion, politics, and language in creating Arabic national pride for Christians, which they can share with their Muslim brothers without being Muslims.

Analysis

The book is comprised of seven articles written by seven theologians from different Arabic countries. It also includes Scripture and subject indexes. While the general editor does not include an introduction, a conclusion, or a bibliography, he writes the final article in the book, in which he explains the role of culture and identity in the Arab Christian community.

Due to the lack of an introduction, the major purpose of the book is not spelled out clearly. But one can gather that the general purposes of the book include introducing what Arabic theology is, demonstrating how it differs from Western theology, and outlining the challenges the Arab Christian community faces while living in majority Muslim countries. Moreover, because of the lack of a conclusion, the intended audience of the book is not mentioned. While it appears that the book is published in the West for the benefit of Western readers, Arab theologians, Bible teachers, and ministers would also benefit greatly from it. Not only does it demonstrate the sorts of objections that Arab Christians struggle with, but it also provides helpful answers to them. This book would also be an asset to evangelical pastors in the Middle East who serve congregations battling with the question of a Christian identity in Muslim majority countries against the backdrop of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The book is comprehensive in nature. It includes many important topics that are related to Arabic culture, politics, and history. “Religion and Politics,” for instance, is one of the most sensitive topics in the Middle East that most ministers and preachers avoid. Although the book does not provide obvious solutions to the Israeli-Arab conflict, it introduces a necessary historical and theological lens through which scholars can evaluate this political conflict and find proper implications apart from political biases. Moreover, Mary Mikhael does a great job of presenting the status of the Arab Christian women and the many challenges that they face while living in a culture in which the dominant religion (Islam) deems them inferior. Although such topics might rarely be raised in the West, they might still prove attractive to Western scholars, especially those working in the mission field or considering it. Global study students will likewise benefit greatly from information shared in this book, especially one based on real political and cultural struggles and not historical phantasies.

The writers of the articles use mostly Turabian style, but they format the footnotes in two columns, which is not Turabian. They also did not use original Hebrew or Greek texts, but they were contained with mere transliteration.

Furthermore, the primary and resources in this book were varied, Western and Arabic, old and contemporary. Some of the historical information needed more citation, such as the first footnote on page eighteen and the recent discovery about the god El (Gendi, 18).

Most of the authors start their articles by presenting objections to their topics. They then spend the rest of the article providing answers that strengthen the arguments of the book. For example, while the Gendi presents the violent objection to the nature of God in the OT and the consequences of this belief (separating God of the OT and the NT), he makes sure that the reader understands that God of the OT is still the Creator, the Redeemer, and the righteous Judge; therefore, He cannot be different or separate God. In the same sense, while Khalaf writes about the Jewish ethnicity background of Jesus and the uproar that it causes to some Eastern Christians, he emphasizes that Christians must concentrate on the religious and cultural background rather than his ethnicity because the latter is subsumed by the church, which includes both Jews and Gentiles (Khalaf, 210).

The way in which these theologians present their arguments, the Arabic way of thinking is clear to someone familiar with it. Most Arabs present their thoughts in sharp contrasts: white and black, right and wrong. This is different from the Western way of thinking, often presented in a *different* (colorful) manner. Western authors usually do not provide clear-cut answers to the situation to be more inclusive and less offending. They treat most views as *different* but not necessarily wrong. Arab writers, on the other hand, while acknowledging the contributions of Western theology, are more explicit in their disagreements.

The book is unique because not many publications were written and published in the West that explains contemporary Arabic theology. Despite the book's length, it repays the investment of time and effort on the part of the reader. The book makes an excellent contribution to the Christian multicultural understanding of the theological differences in the Christian world. This book should help Western theologians understand the struggles of their Eastern Christian brothers and sisters, bridging the gap and contributing, in a better way, to strong biblical scholarship.

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