

Muslims and Christians Debate Justice and Love, by David L. Johnston. Equinox Publishing, 2020. 202 pp., \$32 US. ISBN 978 1781799352

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The recent publication of David Johnston’s reflection on love and justice in the Christian and Islamic traditions seems especially appropriate for a time such as this. After spending a decade and a half in three different Arab countries, Johnston describes an anxiety in his soul. He tells us, “[M]y heart breaks at the devastation and tragedy wrought by the three wars between Israel and Hamas-led Gaza and its continued blockade, the aftermath of the brutal civil war in Syria, the catastrophic war in Yemen, and the suffering of both Iraq and Afghanistan after the ill-fated American-led invasions of the 2000s” (9). As an American, he also writes of political division in the United States and protests in response to the Trump administration practice of separating immigrant children from their parents when prosecuting the latter (3). He reminds us, “When the most vulnerable of human beings come under attack, people of faith speak out” (5).

Johnston’s book is grounded in real-world examples. His second chapter on “Racial Justice in the United States” is an extended case study with reflections on and from Muslim and Christian sources. Each subsequent chapter opens with its own case study as a way to frame and focus the titular debate concerning justice and love: the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, blasphemy laws in Pakistan, sectarian violence, and the rights of Christians in Egypt, Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria, the Christchurch mosque shootings, and Islamophobia generally. On a hopeful note, references to the “Common Word” initiative appear throughout the text, and a short description of the “Justice Conference” appears in the conclusion as an example of “a newfound passion for social justice among Evangelicals, and mostly of the millennial generation” (174). In addition to bringing a helpful focus to the book, the case study approach also advances an argument for the importance of interreligious debate, dialogue, and cooperation. We find ourselves faced with serious challenges, and these challenges will not be overcome unless we can talk productively with one another and work together. By drawing on a variety of examples across the Middle East and North Africa, the case study approach also provides insight into the diversity of Islam and Christianity. Grounded examples compel the reader to reflect on a particular context and reduce the temptation to essentialism that a more abstract study might bring.

Justice and love are broad, complex terms with a long history in Christianity and Islam. Even with the help of case studies, how can we move a debate beyond generalities? The clarity and focus of Johnston's writing is a great help here. He leaves no doubt concerning the "what" and the "why" of his terms. He tells us he is not writing about distributive justice, retributive justice, or procedural justice. While acknowledging the importance of each topic, his argument is fundamental: "I will maintain that justice in human society is tied to the respect of universal human rights" (4). Drawing on the work of Nicholas Wolterstorff, this is a kind of primary justice perceived and reflected upon within a theistic worldview. On this model, some of the rights enjoyed by human beings are conferred by the social orders, but other rights are natural and inherent (48). For Wolterstorff (and Johnston), these inherent rights are affirmed by scripture and they are central to the dignity of the human person as *imago dei* (56). In his fourth chapter on "Justice as Shari'a's Central Purpose," Johnston acknowledges the important contributions of Muslim countries to the global conversation on human rights and provides an extended analysis of tensions surrounding traditionalism and rationalism within the intellectual history of Islam. This leads into careful consideration of how the idea of justice as an overall objective features in renewal movements in Islamic jurisprudence. In the following chapter, an examination of purposive *fiqh* (*maqāṣid al-sharī'a*) in the work of Yusuf al-Qaradawi provides insight into the flexibility and limits of a middle road between traditionalism and liberalism as it relates to justice on the ground.

Johnston is adamant that justice and love must be paired; they are "complementary and inseparable" (3). This is necessary in pursuit of a better understanding of both concepts, and one cannot associate one concept entirely with Christianity and the other with Islam. While Johnston does acknowledge that "At least in my experience, Muslims are more naturally poised to talk about justice than Christians," (65) he makes it quite clear this is not the whole story when he asserts, "I have long fought the stereotype that Muslims only care about justice while Christians only care about love" (3). In his second chapter, Johnston argues that both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King came to see the struggle for civil rights as a struggle for human rights. After his *hajj* experience, Malcolm X developed a view of justice "encompassing all humanity" (22). For King, the beloved community "was about God calling all of us to love our neighbor so that our society would be more just" (26). The interconnectedness of justice, love, and universal human rights is a theme throughout the text that comes into particular focus toward the end.

In Chapter Six, Johnston examines "A Common Word" and Prince Ghazi's academic work, particularly *Love in the Holy Qur'an*. The treatment of "A

Common Word” is subtle and careful in its distinctions among mercy, God’s love for humanity, human love toward God, conditional love, and unconditional love. The turn toward Prince Ghazi’s other work is illuminating and Johnston is able to build his argument for the connection between love, justice, and human rights in Ghazi’s thinking. Johnston writes, “Ghazi vigorously embodied his own words, ‘God has given each and every human being inalienable rights,’ and ‘Muslims have a special affinity with Christians’ through the Common Word document and his bold diplomatic initiatives on both sides of the divide. As the truism goes, actions speak louder than words” (138). In the following chapter, Johnston provides a succinct explanation of Wolterstorff’s argument for the recognition of human dignity in our resemblance and relationship to our creator: a God who loves every human being and “bestows worth on any and every human being” (156). With many of his Christian and Muslim sources, Johnston believes that God loves justice and that justice is inextricably bound up with human love toward God and each other. This is a common ground between Muslims and Christians and a common challenge to be better neighbors and better stewards of the home we share.

In its clarity and emphasis on real-world implications, this volume will be useful to a wide audience of students, scholars, practitioners, and interested readers generally. In its frequent citation and careful explanation of relevant scholarship, it also serves as an excellent guide for further reading in the field. Johnston’s work is not just an analysis of a debate (or dialogue) among Muslims and Christians, it is a constructive and forward-thinking contribution as well.