

Review: Between Allah and Jesus – What Christians Can Learn from Muslims."
(IVP, 2010, 188 pages)

One of the best ways to do theology is in dialogue with others. It compels us to articulate what we believe in a crucible of debate with opposing forces, to state for example why we believe in the Trinity whilst Muslims stress the absolute and indivisible unity of God (*Tawhid*). The danger of course is that our dialogue is with an imaginary partner who comes off second best, portrayed as inadequate and illogical. Not so with "Between Allah and Jesus – What Christians Can Learn from Muslims." (IVP, 2010)

Peter Kreeft sets up a brisk and compelling dialogue between three students and a teacher at a Jesuit theological college, similar to where he has taught since 1965. Kreeft has "unfairly stacked the deck" by creating a very smart and articulate Muslim, an "idealized" Muslim, although he is also at times insensitive and blunt. Amongst his other main characters are a sarcastic Black feminist "liberal", a straight Dutch Calvinist, (her opposite in nearly every imaginable way) and the kindly wise old fashioned Jesuit philosophy professor. They all have something to learn from each other. Kreeft models his Muslim student on a few real Muslims he has met and many more he has read, and has used the same characters before in other works, including a novel.

'Isa Ben Adam, as Kreeft calls his Muslim student, leaves us continually uncomfortable. He shows us a logical, attractive Qur'anic Islam. (Ironically he and his brothers are free to debate and defend their faith in the halls of a Western liberal arts tertiary institution as rarely happens in the Muslim world.) He dialogues on one hand with the relativity of his liberal Christian classmate, with all her compassion but lack of conservative biblical anchoring, and on the other with the cold conservatism of his Calvinist friend. The Jesuit father and professor is the Socratic voice, raising awkward and contradictory questions (p.21), as does Kreeft in his own classroom, whilst also seeking to learn from the ensuing dialogues.

By naming his Muslim student 'Isa Ben Adam, Jesus Son of Adam, Kreeft apparently aims to encourage us to use his character to explore both the Qur'anic Christ after whom he is named, (although the Qur'an calls him only 'Isa Son of Mary) and the Jesus of the Gospels with his unique balance of power and love. Kreeft aims to move us from the passionate fear of the Lord, which his fictional 'Isa displays so well in his submission to God's will in all things, to the tough tenderness found in the biblical Christ. He admires the passion of Muslim believers, and acknowledges it will overcome liberal Christianity, especially in Europe, whilst hoping the next St. Paul is now a passionate Muslim awaiting conversion (2010:17).

Kreeft claims terrorism, violence, politicized religion, mistreatment of women and the apostasy laws are not essential parts of Islamic orthodoxy (2010:11), but gives no textual evidence to support his claim. However Kreeft does give

a compelling list of areas where we can learn from Muslims – faithfulness in prayer, fasting and almsgiving, the sacredness of family and children and hospitality, the absoluteness of moral laws and the demand to be just and charitable, the absoluteness of God and our need of surrender and obedience to him. He has his student friends dialoguing on feminism, heaven and hell, on the nature of prophethood, sexual morality, politics, war, passivism, jihad, evolution, sex, abortion and compassion. These are easy and compelling reading, grippingly and confronting in their bite and punch and counter punch. Together they discover unexpected commonalities, especially in facing a relativistic post modern world which undervalues human life and manipulates through its mass media.

Kreeft aims to move us from simplistic analyses of the conflicts between Islam and Christianity. However he describes a 'Qur'anic Islam' that is distinct from that of the terrorist, without ever discussing the contexts of the violence against unbelievers endorsed in the Medinan surahs of the Qur'an. He describes the inevitable confrontation between 'terrorist Islam and New Testament Christianity, between sword and cross, between murder and sacrifice, between false and true martyrdom' (2010:19). New Testament Christianity, he claims, will win this confrontation because love is stronger than death and hate, in the precious blood of the Lamb.

Kreeft's treatment in his dialogues of the power of the cross and Christ's blood, of the devastating effects of our rebellion and the markedly different remedies Islam and Christianity offers is too limited and uni-dimensional. He helpfully compares the difference between Christ using failure and Muhammad using power to achieve their goals (2010:149,161). Yet Jesus does more, as he forgives his executioners from the cross, thus modelling forgiveness as central to our faith. He forgives us, and thus enables us to forgive others. Moreover the work of Christ in taking and paying for our sin, of entering into our suffering world and redeeming it, of becoming sin for us (2 Cor 5:21) is totally alien to Islam and alone brings us into fellowship with our Father God. God redeems our past and transforms it in his service. Kreeft suggests (2010:117) that the world will only be saved as we all, Muslims and Christians, become 'saints', fully surrendered to God in prayer in all our lives. This comes dangerously close to a universalism that negates the uniqueness of Christ's sacrificial love. Today Muslims are responding to Christ in unheard-of numbers precisely because of his unique self sacrificing love. We need to bear witness to this truth, not undersell it.

Review by David, who has spent many years working with Muslims overseas.