Justice and Rights


Published by Georgetown University Press

Karcic, Fikret, et al.

Justice and Rights: Christian and Muslim Perspectives.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/146

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=362326
Introduction

Christian and Muslim Perspectives

Michael Ipgrave

This volume is a record of the fifth annual Building Bridges seminar of Christian and Muslim scholars, convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., in March 2006. In keeping with the pattern of earlier seminars, a theme of enduring and contemporary significance was addressed through lectures by scholars of both faiths, through study and reflection together on key texts, and through group and plenary discussion. This volume presents the lectures and the texts with introductions and commentarial notes reflecting discussions at the seminar.

The theme chosen for this seminar was “Justice and Rights—Christian and Muslim Perspectives.” As the material presented here demonstrates, this is a topic not only of immense relevance for both faiths in the modern world but also with deep roots in the core texts of both traditions. The very phrasing of the theme may suggest a tension in the way the material is approached. On the one hand, justice is recognized by Christians and Muslims as one of the defining characteristics of God and sought by them as his purpose for a world that is manifestly unjust; in other words, it is laid upon them as a mandate, and traditionally their first response to the vocation of justice has been to think of their obligations, both toward God and toward the other. On the other hand, the language of rights appears to embody and presuppose a principle of human autonomy and assertiveness that may fit uncomfortably with a traditional religious orientation. The situation is further complicated in that among the human rights generally recognized today is the freedom to practice and manifest religion or belief, whether that be Christianity, Islam, another faith, or the explicit absence of religious commitment. It is not surprising that “Justice and Rights” is a theme of serious contest and debate between Christian and Christian, Muslim and Muslim, and Christian and Muslim; between people of faith and those of no faith; and between religious
communities and governments. What is remarkable about the material presented here is the extent to which it shows that Muslims and Christians are facing similar issues, even if the answers they give can differ quite radically.

This seminar and volume differ from predecessors in including among the texts studied not only scriptural material but also documents from the Christian and Islamic traditions, in both the premodern and the modern periods. Given the way in which the societies of Christendom and of the Islamic world have developed over the centuries, and given also the way in which both faiths have throughout their history exhibited many different patterns of relationship with political power, it did not seem possible to treat the subject adequately without reference to texts beyond the scriptures. This in turn provides the rationale for the simple structure of this volume, which follows the pattern of the seminar itself in looking first at the roots of thinking about divine justice in the scriptures, then moving on to survey the evolving traditions of both religions, with a particular focus on the relationship between religious and political authority, and finally reaching the modern context, where issues of rights and freedom come very much to the fore. As this introduction indicates, the themes under consideration are vast in extent and contested in treatment; the hope is that this small selection of resources and collection of reflections can encourage Christians and Muslims to further dialogue on the issues.

Notes


2. Here we understand “scriptures” in a wide sense to include Hebrew scriptures, the New Testament, the Qur’an, and the hadith collections.