

**Andy Bannister, *Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?*, Inter-Varsity Press, 2021, pp. 188, ISBN 978-1-78974-229-9, £9.99.**

**Reviewed by Marcus Braybrooke**

Andy Bannister's lively and sometimes amusing style of writing makes this book easy to read. The footnotes and other references make clear the width of his knowledge of Islam and Christianity. His PhD was in Islamic Studies. His aim is to question the popular assumption that Christians and Muslims worship the same God – what he calls 'hey- isn't-it great-we-believe-in-the-same-god-bandwagon' – a view he claims Pope Francis goes along with. You could also say Pope Francis is following the example of Pope Gregory VII, who in 1076 when, wrote to Prince al-Nasir, saying 'we recognise and confess one sole God, although in different ways.' Bannister's questioning of the assumption is detailed and respectful.

He suggests that while the Bible affirms that God is powerful and exalted and 'lives in a high and holy place', it also says that God is with the one 'who is contrite and lowly in spirit' (Isaiah 57, 15). The word 'Immanuel', used of Jesus means 'God with us.' By contrast the Qur'an stresses the transcendence of God and calls for obedience.' He also quotes a Pakistani scholar, who says that 'there is not a single verse in the Qur'an that speaks of God's unconditional love for humankind.' By contrast, Bannister says, St John – in his first letter – says simply that 'God is love. Whosoever lives in love, lives in God.' Indeed in Jesus, God suffers for us, whereas in the Qur'an God's justice is emphasised. As for Jesus, 'the Qur'an denotes him to the status of just another prophet'.

Bannister contrasts the Biblical teaching that human beings are created in the image of God: but in the Qur'an, human beings have an elevated status, but the relationship is that of 'Master and servant', not of 'Father and child'.

In another chapter Bannister suggests that although the Qur'an borrowed Biblical material, it distorted its original meaning. Jesus is no longer the Son of God, but a revered prophet: but he 'refuses to fit the mould into which Islam tries to squeeze him. But Jesus does fit into Christianity.'

The final chapter is entitled 'For the love of God, come home: Why Christianity is the most inclusive exclusive faith in the world.' Bannister begins by retelling the heroic story of Maximilian Kolbe, who, at Auschwitz, offered to take the place of a fellow prisoner who had been condemned to death and lived out the words of Jesus that 'greater love has no one than this to lay down one's life for one's friends.' Whereas the Qur'an speaks of God's compassion, the Bible speaks of God's love. 'Allah has done nothing about our predicament and has not become

involved... Yahweh cares so deeply for his people that he is moved to action, stepping into history to do something in the person of Jesus.’ Jesus, Bannister says, offers an open exclusivism. ‘He is the only way... but that way is open to anybody.’

And so, the book moves to the conclusion that I had expected when I started to read it. ‘Allah and Yahweh, as described by the Bible and Qur’an are, utterly, irreconcilably different.’

Some years ago after an interfaith service I had arranged, a BBC reporter asked me how I could worship different gods. My answer was ‘I am a monotheist and believe there is one God, but that people of different faiths emphasise different qualities of the Holy One’ or as a Rabbi more succinctly said, ‘Why should God have to keep repeating Him/Her Self.’ Scriptures point beyond themselves and so in reading the text, I try to discover the spiritual experience to which the authors were pointing. As St Paul says, ‘What we now see is like a dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face-to-face. What I know now is only partial, but then it will be complete’. (1 Corinthians, 13, 12). A mother is special to each of her children, but when she dies they may have different memories and her friends and work-colleagues may have yet more insights – each person has particular memories, but they are speaking of the same person. Rather than arguing about who knew her best, it is more helpful to be grateful that she meant so much to so many people. This means that when I share with people of other traditions, I seek to hear the experience of the Divine which they are trying to describe, rather than looking for texts to prove them wrong.

Bannister is right that differences are important and that open discussion can lead to mutual enrichment. Sadly, too often the differences are exploited by extremists to denigrate those of other faith communities. Years ago, Rabindranath Tagore warned that ‘Bigotry tries to keep truth safe in its hand with a grip that kills it.’<sup>1</sup>

In a world where religion is too often hijacked by extremists, conviction and compassion need to go together. Bannister’s book is an example of this. He shares his conviction that God ‘is seen most clearly in and through Jesus,’ but always shows his respect for those whose lives are guided by the Qur’an.