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J. Dudley Woodberry’s life has been focused on connecting the Messiah to the Muslim world. As a young man, this third-generation missionary had an interaction with Samuel Zwemer, the famous missionary and scholar of Islam, who challenged him to follow that same course (15, 19). After 11 years of ministry in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia, Woodberry’s family moved to the United States where eventually he took a position teaching at Fuller Theological Seminary, ultimately serving as dean of the School of World Mission (now School of Intercultural Studies) from 1992–1999 (20–21). Woodberry has influenced generations of students through his teaching and prolific writings.

Toward Respectful Understanding and Witness among Muslims: Essays in Honor of J. Dudley Woodberry is organized around three threads from his “academic and missional life as a professor of Islamic Studies”: encouraging friendly conversation, Christian scholarship, and Christian witness (7). This Festschrift, edited by Evelyne A. Reisacher, explores these themes by joining together fifteen distinguished Christian scholars of Islam and offering “a seldom-available synopsis of the theories of contemporary leading Christian academicians” geared “for people with research interests in Islam, for Bible school and seminary students, for church leaders, and for all those who want to be informed of the latest empirical research and theoretical perspectives affecting Muslim-Christian relations” (back cover). It is a tribute to the legacy of Woodberry: “a cutting edge researcher, who likes to keep the gospel at the center of his academic explorations” (8).

In the first section, Martin Accad’s “Christian Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims: A Kerygmatic Approach” and Jonathan Culver’s “The Ishmael Promises and Mission Motivation” made a significant impression on me as they outline productive approaches that encourage friendly conversation and interaction with Muslims. They invite the reader to consider engaging Muslims using rhetoric that best fits their path as well as to consider paths that may have formerly been deemed off-limits (seeing Ishmael as a potential connection point). Reisacher’s chapter on “Portraying Muslim Women” is also notable for the way that it challenges the reader to move beyond common stereotypes and unhelpful characterizations.

The following section included excellent studies by Dean Gilliland, “Folk Elements in Muslim Expressions of African Religion,” and Stephen Mutuku Sesi, “The Kaya ‘Shrine’ and the Mosque: Religious Bifurcation among Miji-Kenda Muslims in Kenya.” During his time in the Middle East, Woodberry encountered “local expressions of Islam and the varieties of popular Islam that would engage much of his future teaching” (19). I appreciated how this book includes chapters that follow Woodberry’s lead in dealing with the realities of folk Islam, poking into niches of culture and language that are often ignored. Gilliland, for example, looks briefly at how Islam impacts and is affected by traditional leadership structures (189). While I wish the topic was resolved and did not need further discussion, Rick Brown’s chapter “Who was ‘Allah’ before Islam? Evidence
that the Term ‘Allah’ Originated with Jewish and Christian Arabs” approaches his subject matter from a different angle. He examines the history of this word in “inscriptions, historical documents, and Arabic translations of the Bible” to show that this “was the term used by pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian Arabs to refer to God” (163). While not all readers may believe his argument offers the final word on this subject, my hope is that the debate on the Christian use of the name Allah can finally be put to rest!

Any compilation like this can be uneven. I found Kenneth Cragg’s chapter “The Christian Scholar with Islam: ‘Go, Take, Learn’” to be the weakest of the book. While it contained some insights, its lack of structure and specificity left me disappointed. On the flip side, I found the book’s seventh chapter, by Joseph Cumming, on the doctrine of God and possible Christian parallels to be so specific, so nuanced, and so tied its historical situation that it was hard to imagine ways that this scholarly research could be of practical importance.

In the final section, I found Phil Parshall’s “Contextualization” and John Jay Travis’ “Reflections on Jesus Movements among Muslims with Special Reference to Movements within Asian Muslim Communities” to make excellent use of practical on-the-ground experience and research. Parshall uses stories and lists of observations to walk the reader through the ways their mission team actually contextualized. Travis unpacks research done in South Asia, telling actual conversion stories to help show how Muslims come to follow Christ in real life. Caleb Chul-Soo Kim’s “Afflictions of Jinn among the Swahili and an Appropriate Christian Approach” is well-researched and well-constructed, but I was disappointed and surprised to find that he had neglected to consider how a proper pneumatology (being filled with God’s good and Holy Spirit) could address the problem of spirit possession and influence. The final chapter, “Peacemaking as a Witness” by Christine Amal Mallouhi brings the book to an excellent conclusion. I found the section on powerlessness and vulnerability to be especially relevant to the ways Christians should approach Muslims today (268–9).

The book includes a biography of Woodberry that is inspiring, and Jared Holton’s bibliography of Woodberry’s collected works is imposing. Overall, I was impressed with the way this compilation let the work and witness of Woodberry shape the content. It honors Woodberry by following his example as he seeks to follow the example of Christ in walking with us in wisdom into the Islamic world. This is an important resource for the church because, as Shenk notes in the Forward, “at a time when books abound that nurture un-Christian thinking about Muslims, this book refreshingly encourages a spirit of Christlike engagement with Muslims” (1). That may be the most important thread to be found woven through this volume —the centrality of Jesus for respectful understanding and witness.

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