

Kenneth Cragg, *Am I Not Your Lord? Human Meaning in Divine Question*. London, UK: Melisende, 2002. 256 pp. ISBN 1 901764 21 4.

Ever since perpetrators with Muslim affiliations attacked sites of American power on September 11, 2001, both scholarly and common-sense minds have been pondering the links between religion and violence. Unresolved religiously-fueled conflicts in Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East underscore the question. Some thinkers locate violence near the core of religions. Others find violence an aberrant offshoot of religions. Kenneth Cragg, bringing to the debate his lifelong Christian theological engagement with Islam, dares to introduce a little-discussed factor: Satan.

Probing beyond “old enmities and willful ignorance of a vicious kind”, this study maps once again with care how closely the Qur’an and the Bible agree on the unity and uniqueness of God. It then demonstrates how differently the two traditions see 1) the human role in receiving God’s self-disclosure; and 2) the place of suffering in God’s way of working with humanity. Cragg challenges believers who study a religious tradition not their own: “Can either find significant relevance for the other from the things on which we divide, from which the better to explore those on which we agree?” Differences matter to Cragg, but he remains dissatisfied with merely identifying differences. He searches also for areas of elasticity and possibilities within each living tradition for reconceiving even fundamental ideas.

Satan is one such concept -- and one such reality -- nominally shared but differently and too little considered. Christians and Muslims can agree that it is not up to human beings to take the initiative in defining the divine. God acts to bring his own claim of divine Unity to bear by asking humanity: “Am I not your Lord?” (Surah 7: 172). Against this rightful and universal claim by God, however, a conspiracy is at work. The Qur’an, despite an overall high regard for human perfectibility, alerts its hearers to dynamic evil, scheming and lurking on the human scene: “...the whispering insinuator who whispers in the bosoms of men” (Surah 114). Satan -- whether named Iblis, the angel who at Creation resists God’s folly in entrusting earthly dominion to humanity, or called *shaitan*, who vows to waylay human beings on God’s Straight Path and must be resisted with ritual stone-throwing on every pilgrimage to Mecca -- Satan is known to Muslims for his “restless intent” to bring us human beings to grief. The Prophet Muhammad encountered intrigue, mischief, calumny and contradiction. So today human beings are both tempted and assaulted by usurpers of God’s rightful lordship.

Cragg is bold to assert that just as the Pentagon is no rightful Lord, neither is Shari’ah law, coercive conversion, nor the islamic *ummah* conceived as a human cause. If skimmed in haste, this dense and learned book might yield ammunition for holy warriors on both sides. Pondered with a humble and hopeful heart, this book points backward to both pre-Constantinian powerless Christianity and pre-Hijra persecuted Islam as models for the truest living under God.

Richard J. Jones
July 20, 2011



Washington Theological Consortium 487 Michigan Avenue NE Washington, DC 20017
Phone 202.832.2675 fax 202.526.0818 www.washtheocon.org

“Helping spread ecumenical understanding among the religious leaders of tomorrow”