Book Review

Hicham Abdel Gawad


As its title indicates, this excellent book has been written by a school teacher (in French, “prof” is the colloquial term for professeur, i.e., “teacher”) and presents questions that young people have with regard to Islam today. Since the book provides reasonable answers to these questions, it can be of tremendous help to all those working with and among (Muslim) teenagers. The insights contained in the book are applicable both internationally and in a broad range of youth ministry settings (e.g., school and church).

Hicham Abdel Gawad writes as a believing Muslim of Moroccan origin who teaches Islam in a public secondary school in Brussels. In the Belgian public school system, two weekly hours (i.e., a total of 100 minutes) of religion/worldview classes are mandatory. Pupils either have to follow one of the six confessional courses (i.e., Anglican, Catholic, Islamic, Jewish, Orthodox, or Protestant religion) or a non-confessional morals course.

Abdel Gawad divides his book into three parts. In the first part (15–99), he outlines his personal development from a teenager open to Salafist teaching to a university graduate convinced of and versed in the historical-critical approach to the Quran.

In the second part (101–122), Abdel Gawad briefly describes his experiences of teaching high school Islam courses to disadvantaged teenagers. In so doing, he refers to the various challenges he encountered with both atheist colleagues (i.e., some natural sciences teachers) and difficult pupils. With regard to the latter, he gives some advise that, in spite of its self-evidence, is worth repeating: Instead of merely teaching a class to pupils, one should establish a true relationship with young people (114: “ne pas se limiter à donner cours à des élèves, mais établir un vrai relationnel avec des jeunes”).

The third part (124–311) is the bulk and heart of Abdel Gawad’s book. Here, he presents the following ten difficult/relevant questions with which his pupils...
(aged from 12 to 19) confronted him during class: (1) How did Jonah survive in the whale? (2) In the Quran, does God permit men to beat their wives? (3) My imam tells me that the earth is at the centre of the universe. Is this correct? (4) Can we prove that God exists? (5) Why did God not simply give us his Word on a USB stick? (6) If the Quran is perfect, why are so many horrible things committed in its name? (7) Has the Quran been written by human beings and has its content been changed? (8) My father is a Muslim and my mother is a Christian. I am a Muslim like my dad and somebody told me that all non-Muslims will go to hell. Is this true? (9) What does it mean that God has prepared a paradise for the Arabs? What about other peoples? (10) In the mosque, they told me that Aisha was nine years old when she was married to the Prophet. Is this correct?

With regard to each question, Abdel Gawad provides an answer and explains the tools and media he employed didactically to illustrate the answer in the classroom. Unfortunately, the limited scope of this book review does not allow for a detailed examination of the answers. Instead, three general observations can be made in relation to all the answers. Firstly, Abdel Gawad responds to each question by studying the primary sources, i.e., the Quran and the hadiths, together with his pupils (at times even in Arabic!). Secondly, Abdel Gawad uses historical-critical methodologies to explain the primary sources to his pupils. Thirdly, by helping his pupils to read the primary sources critically, Abdel Gawad seeks to either de-radicalise them or prevent their radicalisation.

Hicham Abdel Gawad has written a worthwhile and instructive book on an increasingly relevant subject matter. The book encourages all religious youth workers to approach their ministry with a combination of (1) a solid knowledge of the relevant primary and secondary literature, (2) careful didactical reflection and application, and (3) a true personal concern for young people and their questions.

On a more critical note: While the historical-critical approach to sacred source texts is certainly beneficial to religious youth ministry, one should be careful not to eliminate (if applicable) the confessional character of such a ministry. Abdel Gawad himself is aware that his historical-critical deconstruction of the Quran is at loggerheads with the fact that Islamic courses in Belgian public schools are confessional by definition (266: “déconstruire historiquement le Coran, c’est prendre le risqué de se mettre à dos les élèves, leurs parents et potentiellement l’inspection du cours”). In the same vein, it is telling that Abdel Gawad does not tire of emphasising the fact that he is still a Muslim (cf. e.g., 74: “je suis resté musulman ... Je suis musulman”).

As Abdel Gawad mentions in the “Conclusion” (313–322), Belgian politicians are in the process of considering reducing the two weekly school hours of