Paul L. Heck


The author of the present work is associate professor in the Department of Theology at Georgetown University. He combines the extended study of Christianity and Islam with protracted firsthand experience of both traditions in the United States and in the Arab world. In the present work he wants to answer the question, where the two religions, Christianity and Islam, are alike and where they differ “and how does that tell us about each?” (p. 3) He is aware that in principle, the study of Christianity and Islam through a single albeit refracted lens should include Judaism, since through its strong messianic promise and commitment to religious ethics it “in a way […] stands at the heart of both Christianity and Islam” (p. 2). However, aware of his relative lack of expertise in Judaism, Heck confines his study to Christianity and Islam. The present book is rooted in personal experience. Years of study and friendships across the Christian-Muslim divide have convinced the author ever more of the “common drive for meaning in the light of the one God” (p. 4). Heck looks at the two religions empirically. His analysis follows the methods of the history and the phenomenology of religion. A book of this kind, he remarks, “could be written by someone without religious commitments but only competence in the two religions” (ibid.), and he adds that the common ground between the two religions does not have to be created but rather exists for all those who have acquired the necessary experience and knowledge and thus are as it were at home in both of them. Heck does accept the need for believers in this highly pluralistic world of today of forging their own sense of religious purpose but he opposes the prevailing tendency of affirming “unique claims” (p. 1).

The work has two goals. The first is to encourage reflection on religious thinking pluralistically and to demonstrate convincingly that there is “space to include others under the umbrella of a single truth” (p. 1). Heck does in no way wish to minimize the fact that there is “plenty of uncommon ground” between the two religions. In fact, he states unambiguously that beyond the differences of religious traditions that can be explained by changing historical circumstances, there exist indeed enduring elements in religious traditions. True, “for Christians the way to God will always include the cross. For Muslims the Qur’an will always direct the faithful to him” (p. 3); and yet, he insists, taken altogether, the evidence tilts in the direction of commonality amidst diversity.

The second goal of the work is to “challenge how we think about religion” (p. 5) and “to direct attention to the study of religious pluralism by offering one approach to it” (p. 219). He clearly wishes to counter the tendency to think of
religion in terms of identity. Although it is not wrong, he argues, that believers speak in terms of their distinctive beliefs and practices, but this prevailing tendency too often keeps them at a distance “from those people with that identity” (p. 5). Heck wishes to obtain a fuller knowledge of religion in the light of the fact that no religion is reducible to a set identity. Religion “unfolds across a broad range of categories that several species of religion share” (ibid.). Thus he considers it essential “to get at the subjectivity of religious actors beyond so-called objective definitions of their identity” and thus “to overcome the tendency to limit Islam to identity classification” (pp. 5f.). Within a pluralistic horizon Islam “is not simply an object to be identified as a separate species from other objects but [...] a subject sharing a measure of character traits with other subjects, such as Christianity” (p. 6).

In the light of this basic approach the work explores in six chapters “topics of central importance to Islam with reference to commonality in Christianity” (ibid.). The first two relate to concepts of prophecy. Both, the Christian and the Islamic tradition, see religion as an initiative that begins and ends with the one God. They conceive of Scripture as a means that exists in order to open a way to be in God’s presence. In their respective practice of piety Christians and Muslims alike strive for this goal. Prophecy, recorded in scripture, for Christians and Muslims is the point of departure for a life with God. However, religion, as divine initiative, set in motion by prophecy and fulfilled in sanctity, leaves room for human thinking, for human questions and queries, even for doubts about the message of prophecy and teachings of the tradition. In other words “the mind has a place in religion, and doubt in the mind is not the enemy of God” (p. 71). Chapter three deals with ethics. Both, Christians and Muslims believe in a God, who is not limited to one tribe or clime. Such belief expands the ethical outlook. It is also clear that for Christians and Muslims alike revelation announces the good news, offering spirituality for humans, freeing them from the limits of self-interest and self-regard in preference for a loving and merciful kindness inspired by the face of God. Spirituality understood as “the dispositions one cultivates in the soul” (p. 108), is a necessary precondition for the formation of a truly noble ethical character, something that is desperately needed in society today, not simply for the sake of ethical harmony but even so for the good of society. In chapter four Heck tries to demonstrate that jihad properly understood means “struggle to make God’s word highest [...], for the reign of God [...]” He points out that this struggle “had great urgency for Muhammad. Like Paul, he set his sights on the great day of the Lord. For both, it was not enough to live justly in this world. One needed to prepare to meet God and to be saved – or lost” (p. 110). For Heck, it would seem, jihad and “mission” are two words for more or less the same reality. He