

Islamic Law and God's Love

Considering the beliefs of others carefully, and interacting with them out of one's own most deeply-held commitments, can bring a kaleidoscope of insight into an otherwise monochrome faith. Such at least was the case with Sir Norman Anderson.

Norman Anderson was a British scholar who arguably went as deep in the study of shariah as any non-Muslim. After 15 years of work and study in the Middle East, during which he learned Arabic thoroughly, Anderson taught as Professor of Oriental Laws at the University of London between 1954 and 1975. He became a world authority on contemporary Islamic Law in Africa and the Middle East.

He also began to write extensively on comparative religion. Out of nearly 50 years of practical and academic engagement with Islam, Anderson wrote *God's Law and God's Love* in 1980. This book is a fine example of the intellectual stimulation that long-term and open-minded interaction with theological differences can bring.

Anderson's research confirmed much of what has been described in these columns, including the observation that "Islamic law is the epitome of Islamic thought, the most typical manifestation of the Islamic way of life, the core and kernel of Islam itself." Anderson learned that the most important difference between monotheistic faiths is *not* whether they have law or not. What he saw rather was the difference in the *function* assigned to the law—the role it plays in the relationship between God and humanity.

For the Christian, Anderson wrote, "the law of God is no longer an external set of commandments which challenge an unwilling, and even impossible, obedience, but the gracious will of his Saviour God which is now inscribed, internally, on his heart and mind."

Thoughts about law in turn led him inexorably to differences in the concept of God. Anderson found that while orthodox Islam is rich in specifying God's will for humanity, the person, nature and character of God "remain shrouded in largely negative abstractions." At this point Christians and Muslims must—as he put it—part company.

A telling criterion of theology is whether God truly loves humanity. Anderson found the love of God in the Qur'an conditional, and the discussion of divine love in the *hadith*

ambivalent. The theme of the love of God in Sufi practice he found to be an expression of rebellion against the orthodox emphasis on God's law.

Reflecting again on his own faith, Anderson saw that in the gospel both the holiness of God and the love of God are prominent, and that these meet at the Cross. In his conclusion, he came to a kind of epiphany about his spiritual journey:

“Christ's resurrection and exaltation mean that we do not follow a dead prophet but worship, and seek to obey, a living Saviour who is eternally one with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the unity of the triune Godhead (for only one who was truly divine could redeem us from sin), but is also still man. So he is able both to understand us and to meet our every need.”

Sir Norman Anderson's deep study of Islamic Law highlighted insights into his own faith which he may otherwise not have seen. His story points to a positive way ahead in interfaith conversation. Anderson set out to study sympathetically a faith other than his own, to respect his partner in the dialogue, and to maintain faithfulness to his own commitments. He found serious differences at the most basic level. But there was never a question of intolerance or violence. Quite the contrary: the experience led him to a celebration of God's love.