War and Peace in the Middle East

Part 2 of 2: Understanding Religious Conflicts in the Middle East
with
Release Date: November 2015
Dr. Darrell Bock: Well, as I said, we're not going to solve this in the remaining less-than-half-hour that we have left, so I'm not even going to try. Imad, why don't you talk a little bit about what it's like to be a Christian, in this kind of a context. Obviously, religiously a minority, obviously, surrounded by two other important monotheistic faiths, whose politics and relationship to each other dominate the region. And Christians are this little voice in the midst of all this.

Paint the picture, for us, of what it's like to be a Christian in the Middle East, these days.

Dr. Imad Shehadeh: That's a very good question, and so hard to know where to begin. But, again, these are unprecedented times, and Christians – it's a mix things. First of all, Christians are more bold to challenge peoples of the other faiths and majority religion, as to, "What is your teaching? Are we in danger? Are we next? Are we going to be swallowed up? But is that your teaching?"

So it's forcing the other side to deal with their texts and to define an answer, so there's this more open dialogue about, "Why do you hate us? What's wrong with Christianity? Why do you hate the cross? Why is the cross an offense to you? Why does this extreme school want to destroy Christians and crosses?"

Incidentally, a lot of the people in the West do not know that the word for "crusade" in Arabic – crusaders – is, literally, "the cross people." So the cossaders. So every time they mention the Crusades, they mean the cross people, that is, the Christians.

So there's this more open dialogue, open where the Christians are challenging Muslims in that way, and asking them, "What is your teaching?" And then it's very interesting that there's been a lot of amazing new attempts by Muslims, who see themselves as moderate, to try to reinterpret their documents. And I mean by their documents, the Koran and the Hadith, to try to give it a different perspective.

Of course, the problem is that they've got to use a hermeneutic that's convincing, because it ends up being very allegorical, while so many, countless texts are very difficult and they're threatening to the existence of Christians. So there's that issue.
The Table Podcast

War and Peace in the Middle East

But then, also, we're facing a large number of people from the other faith leaving that faith, into no-man's-land. They're just disenchanted. Of course, some of them find true faith in the Lord, but there's just this larger group, it is a growing group, an unstoppable movement. Christians side with this other group politically, because there's now a bigger voice for democracy, for everybody's right to exist and express their faith.

But then there are issues that the church in Jordan, particularly, is facing. Christians are asking, "Well, should we bear arms? What if these extremists come in across the border —" They've tried to do that many times — "What if they cross the border and they're threatening our cities and our churches? Should we bear arms?"

That's a tough question, and we're very careful at not answering that question without really studying it. And that's why I wrote to you earlier, Darrel, about Just War and how can we handle this? And so, we're struggling. We had several events at the seminary, where we invited political leaders to come and open dialogues before the Christian and Muslim community. About freedom, about openness, about these texts that called for exterminating the other side.

And, of course, we had, also, to deal with issues, like to compare the Canaan conquests with terrorism. How does that differ? And we go into this very deeply and show the difference. It's been an amazing way to present the Gospel and how, finally, the cross, it really absorbs all wrath forever. And that there's nowhere else where wrath is absorbed. Christ took care of it.

So, it's never been so exciting to share the truth, than these days. But there's still fear. People are afraid. It's also affected our fundraising.

Who wants to support a ministry in the Middle East, when it's being destroyed, and so forth? So these are some issues.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Let me ask you a question that's often raised about the way. If you can't comment, then just let me know. But I've sometimes heard it said that in the Koran there are really two strands of texts, because of the history of Islam itself. That, initially, it seemed to take an approach that says, "Well, we will cooperate with the other monotheistic faiths and recognize our common roots."
And then, as things moved on later, the text became more hostile. Is that a fair way of seeing what became the assemblage in the Koran? That we have these two levels, and that's part of what's producing the confusion – even among Islamic theologians – about how to work with and read the Koran?

Well, yeah, you've hit a very sensitive chord. That's very true. In the earlier days of Mohammed, the verses of the Koran, these are his teachings where he's saying to be kind to Christians and Jews, and so forth. But then later on, that changed when he became stronger. So now, in Islamic theology, it's being taught as this very formal doctrine called the Doctrine of Abrogation. Meaning, it's the study of which verses have been abrogated – erased – and replaced by other verses.

So, these verses calling on being kind to the other side are abrogated, they do not apply, today. What applies today are these verses that call on all Muslims to spread Islam. And it's geographical, it's – and not to rest until it's spread all over. So that's what scares – So Christians are asking, "Is this really true?"

Again, this raised – We've had, recently, some recent efforts by Muslim scholars – The latest was last July, 2014. Over 126 worldwide scholars wrote a letter to the self-proclaimed khalifa of ISIS. And went through these several selected texts from the Koran and Hadith, trying to give them a different interpretation than the interpretation that ISIS is taking.

And it's interesting to study this, to see the amazing effort to try to give it a meaning that's really not in the text. And that's the difficulty where Islam is finding itself, they are, "What do you do with these texts?" There's got to be a convincing method of, "Why did you look at them?" So, making the words carry much more weight than they can carry, and it was allegorical interpretation. And so, the other side was not really convinced.

But it's interesting, at least, that there's an internal struggle within Islam. Some people say Islam has got to be a reformation, kinda like the Protestant reformation. But few people know that what ISIS is doing, it really is reformation, in their perspective. That's going back to their Scriptures – just like reformers of the Protestant reformers went back to the Scriptures. Only, the result is completely the opposite.
The Table Podcast

War and Peace in the Middle East

Because of this abrogation and the sequencing of these texts?

Dr. Darrell Bock

Right, yeah. So, how can you reform a text? You can reform people, but you cannot reform a text that's revered as inspired by God. And this is the very difficult struggle that Islam finds itself. And then, with that, when we look at countries like Saudi Arabia has been teaching, is proclaiming these texts and these teachings. And now, finding itself – you know, it's brought trouble to them, to the country of Saudi Arabia, trying to protect themself from the thing they created.

And so, this is what's going on, and I may have said too much. [Laughs]

Dr. Darrell Bock

So, again, part of what makes this valuable is that there is this internal discussion and debate that I would say many Americans aren't even aware of. They just have no clue that these tensions exist within Islam. All you're doing is describing what's there, and part of what makes this such a difficult reality to try and cope with.

So, let me turn our attention in another direction. We're rapidly running out of time. And it's this. So, in the midst of all this chaos that we've described, all the pressure, all the tension, et cetera, what are you trying to say to the students who come to your school, about how the Gospel speaks into this?

Dr. Imad Shehadeh

Well, there's so much that can be said. If we talk about the difference between Canaan conquest and terrorism, there's just so much to talk about. But it all leads to the cross, and, basically, like one convert from the majority religion said that, "The extremism tells us to die for God; but the Gospel tells us that God died for us, for man."

And that, if we want to talk their language, in their mind – the mind of the extremist – it's the deserved judgment of God on Christians, on whoever they consider their enemies. It's that deserved judgment. Well, our answer says, "Yeah, we all deserve judgment, surely. God is righteous and we've sinned against Him, but there's one person that took it for us. You don't have to kill anymore, because there's one that took it all for us. And that is Jesus Christ, on the cross. He absorbed all judgment. If you believe in Him, you're protected from what you call the deserved judgment."
And so, the conquest wars were really an expression of God's holiness against sin. But, also, it was a message pointing strongly to the cross, where the final judgment comes and God does not want to judge people. He wants to save people. And so here lies the very difference, in that, in Islam, they don't want the idea of a prophet – meaning Jesus – to be humiliated and killed is unacceptable. It's not honoring to Him. It's not acceptable. He should not go through that.

Well, that's the very message of it. Had He not been willing to be insulted and beaten, we would not have salvation. That's the very, very heart of the difference.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**

So Christianity is very much a countercultural message, in your context.

**Dr. Imad Shehadeh**

Yes, very much so. But it's also an opportunity where it's like whatever's going on right now is paving the way for this bright glory of the cross that is shining, and giving boldness to Christians to proclaim it, to show the beauty of it. And it's interesting to discuss this in class and have different students make presentations, imagining that they're talking to the leaders of these extremist groups. And presenting the Trinity, presenting the Gospel to them, and speaking their language and giving them an answer.

If they would only just listen – oh, these people are so creative, these students, and watching them express their faith. So, these are some of the things that, again, I'm saying a lot, here, because of a lack of time, it's so many issues. But it's really, I'm saying, it's an exciting time to communicate the truth of the Gospel, at this time and in this way.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**

Because what you see in the activity of God is, rather than being a God of wrath and one to whom a total submission is demanded, and therefore a price is extracted, if I can say it that way. In contrast to that, what we see is a God who's a relational God, a covenant God, not just a sovereign God. And in the midst of that, He offers of Himself that which we cannot supply for ourselves, as the way out of this trap that we find ourselves in.
The Table Podcast

War and Peace in the Middle East

Dr. Imad Shehadeh

That's right. Yeah, exactly. And, of course, as Muslims believe in Christ – amazingly, they believe in His virgin birth, that He did miracles. But it stops right there. He's a prophet. He did not die on the cross, did not rise from the dead. So we tell ourselves, okay, there's some common understanding about Christ. But the Bible gives us a little bit more – actually, much more – about this person.

So, we talk their language – What if a head of state would walk into this room? Does that demean him? Does that make him less honorable? Of course not. What if God, in His greatness, wants to save us, and he wants to come down to us? And here's what we have in Christ. And this person, Christ, has another nature, that's a divine nature, and He's coming to suffer for us, to save us.

So, in other words, it's amazing how new ideas of communication come to present the truth, in a country that's very much shame and honor culture. Where it would be more acceptable to see the difference and to quiet their anger, and so forth.

Dr. Darrell Bock

The interesting thing that strikes me – now, this is studying the majority religion from a distance – is, what I see primarily out of the picture of the faith is this picture of this sovereign God. But the relational dimensions of God that we see in the New Testament, or in the Old Testament, are not there. They're not emphasized. They're not present. God is strictly this – it's almost this ranking that we have to deal with.

And so, the very idea of God taking on – to use the language of Philippians, of emptying Himself, of taking on – flesh is a very radical idea, in the context of the majority religion, isn't it?

Dr. Imad Shehadeh

Oh, that's at the heart of it. That's it right there. And, actually, if you trace it back, you find, okay, because they reject the Trinity – which means they reject a relationship within God – So, why did God create the world? Because He lacked the relationship. He only began to have the relationship after the Creation, in their understanding.

And so, God, in Himself, was only a God of will. And whatever He did was by this sheer power of will. So every other attribute is a subset of this powerful will. And so, even when they say merciful and compassionate, it's not so much that He is that way, but He can be that way. And He can also be the opposite. He can be so many attributes, because it's all under this big, powerful will.
And, again, it stems back from not being relational in Himself, not having that eternal love of a father-son relationship in the spirit. And so, that's –

Dr. Darrell Bock  
So is there an element of love, grace?

Dr. Imad Shehadeh  
Yes, it's spoken of, but it's a different concept. It's not a father-son relationship. It's more of a master-slave relationship, where this master would choose to bestow grace on a slave if he chose to, but it's up to him. And for us to say – there's no assurance, here. In other words, for me to say, "I'm sure I'm forgiven," it means that I have caused God to act in a certain way on my behalf. That's limiting His power.

He's beyond law. He's beyond promise. He's free of all of that. Even of His own laws. You just don't know. That's in their theology, in their teaching. And that, again, stems from rejecting the Trinity, rejecting a relational part. It all translates into this. And it's fascinating to see the struggle in history, in their struggle to understand the attributes of God and how it relates to man. And so, it all comes down to this.

Dr. Darrell Bock  
Now, are there any – We've got – This is such a rare opportunity, to be able to ask these kinds of questions. Are there any covenant structures in the majority religion? Or is everything just a function of creation-creature sovereignty.

Dr. Imad Shehadeh  
They speak of one covenant of works. In other words, God, in their understanding, had a covenant with the Jews. They broke it, so He had a covenant with the Christians. And they broke it. And part of their breaking it was to declare Jesus as divine and that He died on the cross, and by doing so, they broke that covenant. So He put them aside, God put them aside, in their understanding, and now it's the Muslims. And, again, it's all one covenant of works with all people. You obey, you will not – it's that relationship. So the concept of grace in the Christian understanding, of undeserved favor, is not there, in their understanding.

Dr. Darrell Bock  
It really is the ultimate supersessionist theology, in some ways, isn't it?
In which God's favor now rests with this third group that has come along.

Dr. Imad Shehadeh

Right.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Interesting. We're so short on time, I kind of don't know where to – Why don't you tell people, a little bit, about the school and what you do? And how it is, if I can use a picture, it's kind of an oasis in the Middle East.

Dr. Imad Shehadeh

It really is, and we're just full of thanksgiving to the Lord, for bringing us to this point. The seminary is 24 years old, and it has not been easy to get it established and recognized by the government, have accreditation of our degrees and programs, or by international accrediting bodies – European, Asian, so forth.

But it's existed, and we try to reach the 22 Arabic-speaking countries – that's a block of 350 million people. But we cannot get them all because of, obviously, visa problems, security issues, and lack of freedom in most of those parts. So we have to work around these. But we're hoping and we're experimenting with all kinds of ways to train men and women. And now their number has grown, even from the majority religion, coming to faith and screaming for training.

So we feel privileged to be in this part of the world, at this time, to do this.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Now, if someone wanted to give to the seminary, how would they do that?

Dr. Imad Shehadeh

Well, it's easy. We have a website, it's jets.edu. There is a donate button.

Dr. Darrell Bock

J-E-T-S.edu, right?

Dr. Imad Shehadeh

That's right, J-E-T-S.edu, and do it quickly.
Let me ask you another question that is kind of hovering around the edges, here. You've spoken a few times of majority people who have come to faith – and we hear this, over here, but don't know kind of what to make of it – that there are a lot of people who are reconsidering their faith commitments, as a result of what's going on in the Middle East?

That's true.

Is that going on?

That is true. And it's strong and it's a big movement – in relative terms, it's something that is unstoppable, right now. We just wish that they had the opportunities and the freedoms to do what they would like to do. So the next step is for these people to declare their place more publicly.

Mm-hmm, and there's a lot of pressure, of course, not to do that.

Right. Yeah, you can imagine. [Laughs]

Yeah, in fact, I think the first time I really encountered the expression "secret believers" was in a majority religion context, if I can say it that way. And hearing stories about people who wrestle with the consequences of revealing where they really are.

That's right.

Now, how much pressure are you under? And I guess the way I want to ask this is, it strikes me that one of the interesting things – about Jordan, at least – is I'm very aware of the site that is located near where John the Baptist is traditionally said to have baptized Jesus. And it's almost unusual – in an Arab context – cooperation and presence of a Christian site, if I can say it that way.

So, Jordan is not like some other places in the Middle East, is that true?
The Table Podcast

War and Peace in the Middle East

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dr. Imad Shehadeh</th>
<th>Yeah, relatively speaking, Jordan is stable and it's welcoming. It's a friendly country, and we're very thankful for it. Of course, it's still a Muslim country. There are limitations, but Jordan is a – Christians do exist freely, they have their own church buildings and their worship. And so for people to come from the majority religion publicly is not allowed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And, incidentally, speaking of John the Baptist, of course, for touristic reasons, the two people on both sides of the river, they each claim that the Baptist did his thing on each side [crosstalk] of the river.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Darrell Bock</td>
<td>Yeah, I've been to that site. It's one of the most fascinating spots in the world, to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Imad Shehadeh</td>
<td>Well, we have, on the front entrance of JETS, a replica of the map from the 6th Century, a mosaic map from the Mountain Nebo picture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Darrell Bock</td>
<td>Yes, I've seen that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Imad Shehadeh</td>
<td>But what's interesting about that map is that it has John the Baptist, from the 6th Century, baptizing on both sides of the [crosstalk] river.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>So, we've got it covered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Darrell Bock</td>
<td>That's good. Well, they must've anticipated what we were gonna need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>Can I ask a question?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Darrell Bock</td>
<td>Yeah, yeah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>You talked a little bit about the favorable environment, there in Jordan. What do you attribute that to?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Imad Shehadeh</td>
<td>That's a good question. We have a monarchy, of course, and in some ways that gave Jordan stability, because the people are not ready for a democracy, of electing and so forth. It's very much a tribal society, so the throne gives stability to the country.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Table Podcast

War and Peace in the Middle East

Secondly, we have a good king. We've had very good kings, and presently King Abdullah and his father the late King Hussein were both wise men that loved peace. They're very careful in their decisions, and very extremely difficult situations. You've got the teaching of the majority religion, but then you've got Israel. But then you've got the extremists – and they're trying to please all sides, dealing with refugees coming in.

I think it's got to be the grace of God. It's just got to be. God has a plan. Of course, eschatologically, we know that in the Tribulation, people will run to the East for refuge. And we don't know if that's part of the plan. This is from Daniel 11 and some other verses in Revelation. We don't know. We're just living day-to-day, thanking God for what we have [laughs], but we don't know. So, so far, so good.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Well, Imad, it's been a real pleasure to have you kind of give us a glimpse from within the Middle East, kinda what's going on there. I say that sometimes on podcasts. This time, I mean it even more than even when I say it at other times. We have barely scratched the surface of what's going on and the complexity of what's involved, here.

Andy

Yes.

Dr. Darrell Bock

But hopefully the conversation has given people a little glimpse of the mix that is making for the situation that we find in the Middle East. And we certainly are encouraged by the presence of JETS and by the ministry that goes on, there. And by the way in which Arabs and Palestinians are being trained to reflect the faith in a context that actually, in some ways, is like the context the early church came out of. As a distinctly minority faith, surrounded by a lot of people who didn't get it, and trying to live it out in a way that is as faithful as possible.

So we thank you for being with us and giving us the time. And, Andy, I want to thank you, as well, for giving us a kind of a look at the aspects of the military side of things, and kind of how that fits into the mix. And give us a little perspective on sensitivities that the military has, as it carries out its responsibilities to protect people. It's an interesting mix –

Andy

It is.
The Table Podcast

War and Peace in the Middle East

Dr. Darrell Bock – that we've tried to deal with, here, in this podcast, and hopefully it's been beneficial to our listeners. So I want to thank you for being a part of it. And thank you for listening to us on The Table, where we discuss issues of God and culture. And we look forward to having you back again with us, soon.