

A western introduction to Islam

Khaled Ahmed

reviews

THE VISION OF ISLAM

by Sachiko Murata & William C. Chittick

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The book has an interesting origin, one that makes it remarkably 'new' in the given environment today. It grew out of teaching Islam since 1983 at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, where one-third of the students were Muslims from all over the world in addition to the Americans who wished to acquire basic knowledge of Islam. The result is a clear and sympathetic but objective account which explains the vision of Islam in juxtaposition with Judaism and Christianity. Consequently, the most interesting parts are those where presumed conflicts between Islam and the other monotheist religions of the Middle East are explained.

What immediately strikes the reader is the copious selection of direct quotations from the Quran and the linkages they have with the hadith. The authors have put in one place all the scattered references and thus presented a thematic unity for better explanation. There are junctions in the book where quotations from the Quran form clear messages with remarkable contemporary relevance. Also, the common Muslim misreading prompted by politics is revealed, a subject that the authors tackle with great

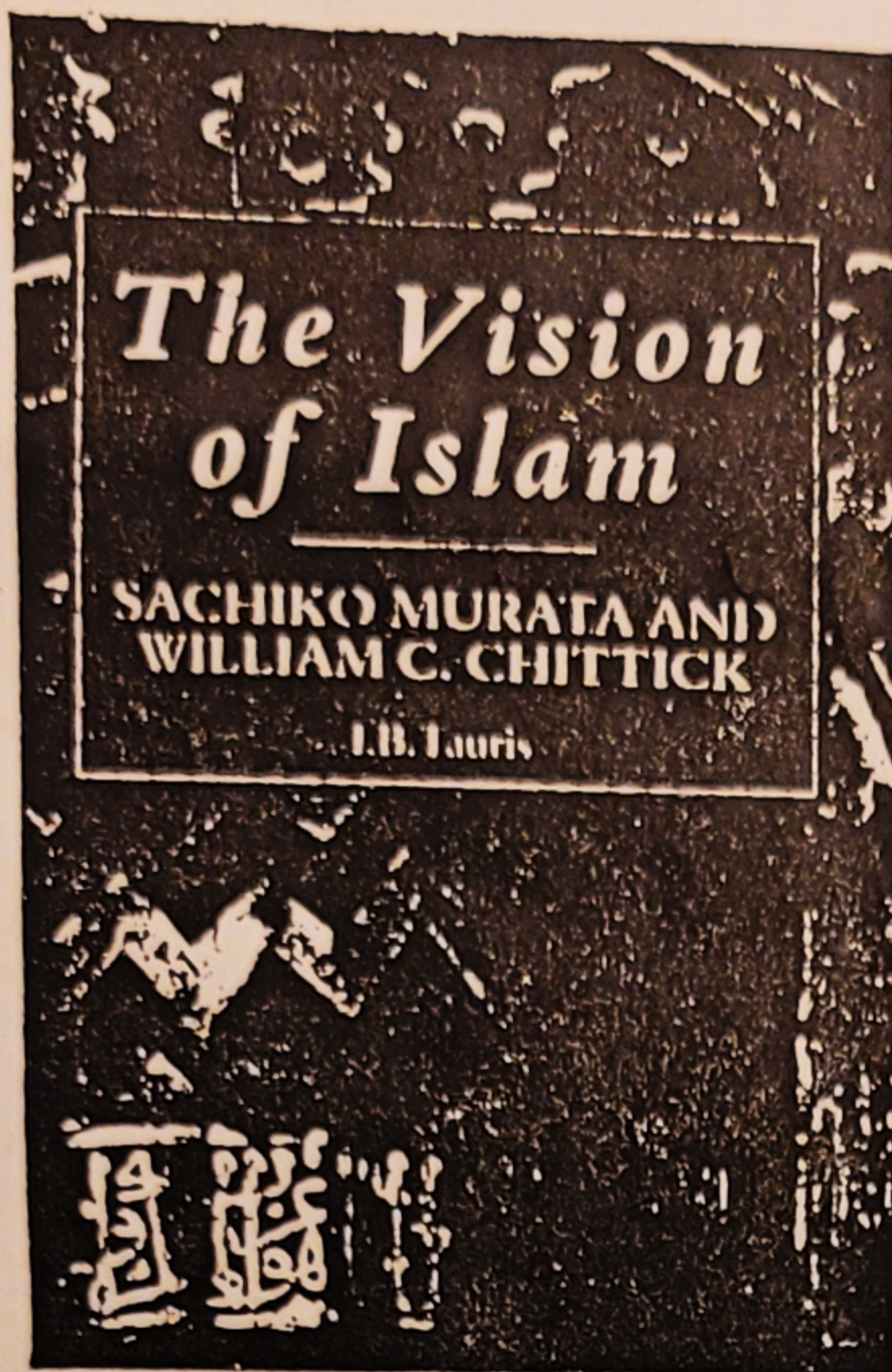
tact. The effort is to 'unite' the religions on the basis of the unity of their basic message, not to extract adversary interpretation. For instance, the Quranic concept of 'qadr' is referred to the root of the word 'qdr' (measuring out) to understand the attribute of Allah as 'qadir'. This leads to the general understanding of 'freedom' and 'destination' in Islam. The book surprisingly easily comes to a clear understanding of the area of freedom given to humankind by Allah and explains away the seemingly controversial concept of predestination.

In the chapter titled 'Iman', under the rubric of 'guidance and misguidance', the authors explain the idea of Allah misleading men through a dozen quotations from the Quran. Towards the end it becomes clear that Allah confounds and misleads those who choose in their freedom to defy his commands. It also makes clear that non one who follows His commands is ever 'misguided' by Allah. 'Even so, God misguides the truth-concealers' (40:74). The section devoted to the explication of Satan actually adds to the knowledge of Satan as understood in Judaism and Christianity. In the earlier religions Satan comes to occupy a parallel kingdom from where he challenges God, but in Islam the station of Satan remains clearly subservient to Allah. The Quran (7:13-18) in a wonderful dialogue, reproduced in the book, gives us the parameters allowed to Satan. He asks Allah to stay his reckoning till the Last Day and Allah grants him that. There is freedom granted to Satan to misguide men. Satan is not a power opposed to Allah. He is an angel who fell into error through envy and pride and Allah sends him down to Earth to test his believers.

The authors explain how Allah sent

down prophets to all mankind who spoke their language, and then He sent down prophets to the land where the three monotheist religions were born. The Muslims are bound by 'shahadah' (witnessing) to accept all prophets because their messages are interlinked and they are bound by the command that these religions are progressively 'completed' with time. Islam is explicitly made different from Judaism and Christianity through this progressive change which is towards 'easiness': the Quran says how Islam is made 'easier' in the process. It says, 'And we have preferred some prophets over others, and We gave David the Psalms'. About Islam's attitude to Judaism and Christianity, the Quran is also explicit: 'Those who have faith and those of the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabaeans - whoso has faith in God and the Last Day and works wholesome deeds - their wage awaits them with their Lord, and no fear shall be upon them, neither shall they sorrow' (2:62, 5:69). This verse places the three religions at par, and the yardstick is faith and deeds.

About the doctrine of Trinity which the Quran clearly denounces, the book explains that it doesn't apply to common Christian faith which accept God as one but sees him represented in three different manifestations. The Quranic reprimand thus applies only to those who negated the 'tawhid' (one-ness) of God. The book quotes the Quranic verse: 'Some of the Jews altered words from their meanings saying "we have heard and we disobey"...' (4:46). Here the operative word is 'some'. It is quite possible that some Christians who had apotheosised Christ and raised him above God were condemned by the Quran. Unfortunately, Muslims themselves have tended in



some cases to follow the Christians in this regard although Quran repeatedly defines the Prophet PBUH as his 'abd' (servant). As for the condemnation of the Jews and Christians, this has to be understood within the time-frame of the revelation. The Quran is quite clear in its preference for Ahle Kitab. The book examines the doctrine of 'distortion' in the earlier holy books and refers to the Andalusian Muslim scholar Ibn Hazm (d.1064) who took the trouble of examining all the books to see how the 'distortions' had taken place. These days that kind of scholarship is not seen among Muslims. The book under review is a proof of that the Western Christian-Judaic world has this ability of comparative study in our day.