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One doesn't envy Islamic scholar Khalid Duran the task of trying to describe his religion to any audience, let alone a Jewish one, but must admire his courage for making the attempt.

As he states in the preface to this five-chapter volume (a companion to *The Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims* by Reuven Firestone): "The important thing is to delineate both the ideal and the reality honestly, rather than project unsavory practices at the expense of lofty ideals or present ethereal ideals as if problematic actualities did not exist... sometimes there is more beauty and sometimes more ugliness, sometimes the ideal is stronger and sometimes the reality bleaker. Sometimes it is not so clear what really is the ideal, and even the reality cannot always be easily gauged."

With a whole chapter dedicated to "Present-Day Threats" - in which he decries the "hijacking" of key concepts such as shari'a (Islamic law) and jihad by the "Islamists" and "jihadists" - Duran takes great care to distance what he calls the essentially pacifist, pluralistic faith taught by Muhammad (who said "Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you" and "An Arab is not superior to a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab superior to an Arab") from the twisted travesty with which the world has become all too familiar since September 11.

What Muhammad intended, says Duran, was not to create a third religion after Judaism and Christianity, but "to bring them all together on a common platform: the reconstituted Abrahamic original."

But rather than unifying Judaism and Christianity, multiple assassinations in the wake of Muhammad's death in 632 meant that within a century Islam itself was split between the Shi'is, who felt that only members of Muhammad's family could succeed him, and the "orthodox" Sunnis who, following Muhammad's example, bestow leadership of their churchless community, where every believer is his own priest, on the most worthy.

"In the course of time," relates Duran, "each of these early factions developed a separate theology, drifting apart in matters of ritual and law as well as communal structure. What at one time were political parties turned into religious sects."

The Shi'is thus created the imamate, while the Sunnis instituted the caliphate, a religious-political-economic empire which eventually came to dominate a large part of the world.

The immense wealth and concomitant "boisterous materialism" of the caliphate eventually became an affront to many pious dissenters, who reacted by embracing an ascetic, fatalistic lifestyle and wearing garments of coarse wool (suf). Thus arose a branch of modern Islam known as Sufism, often described as Islamic mysticism.

HOW THE originally simple, but today almost anarchic religion known as Islam has interacted with the world's Jews over the past 1,400 years is the subject of Duran's third chapter, "Jews and Muslims." This chapter begins with a section titled "A Difficult Start," goes on to describe the Muslim version of plurality (dhimmitude) - in glorious theory and often-less-than-glorious practice - and concludes in the modern era ("Fresh Wounds and Dim Hopes: The Twentieth Century" and "A New Page for Other Priorities: the Twenty-First Century").

The fourth chapter is titled "Religious Life and Society," and outlines the origin and nature of the Koran, providing some details about the religion as practiced today.

But Duran leaves out much. For example, the explosive and, to Jews, incredible claim that God's Chosen People have corrupted the Torah (according to Muslims, it was Ishmael and not Isaac who was almost sacrificed by Abraham) is mentioned only in passing.

In his final chapter, "Women: The Most Vexing Question," Duran laments what he seems to feel is Islam's greatest shortcoming: its attitude toward and treatment of females.

The book then concludes with a chronology and a much-appreciated glossary of terms.

To sum up, *Children of Abraham* is a courageous and much-needed attempt to explain one side of an age-old conflict to the other, but doesn't provide the greater understanding of Islam or explain its antipathy toward Judaism that this reader was hoping for.