

Desperately Seeking Paradise –Journeys of a Sceptical Muslim by Ziauddin Sardar.
Granta 2004.

In the slew of books on Islam and the Islamic world that have been published since the attacks on America of September 11th 2001, whose purpose may be broadly summarised as either informing or criticising, there has been precious little which has shed light on the (apparently) hidden world of Islamic intellectualism and especially the voices of intelligent dissent against the headlong rush to extremism and violence.

Desperately Seeking Paradise fills that lacuna perfectly, and those of us who are both fascinated by Islam and the Muslim world and fearful of its collision with the West owe a huge debt to Dr Sardar for his openness, honesty and integrity.

Through the course of 14 chapters, the author takes his readers on the course of his spiritual journey, its highs and lows, its achievements and frustrations; he introduces us to some important contemporary and past individuals in the Islamic intellectual pantheon, and he details events known from other contexts, such as the Iranian Revolution, with the eye and knowledge of an insider.

There is much in this superb book to delight as well as inform, and few readers can fail to be impressed by Sardar's courage and commitment. The chapter on the Satanic Verses of Salman Rushdie and its impact on Sardar and his friends is both powerful and moving, and his conclusions, while not full of hope are nevertheless not wholly devoid of it. Whether you are interested in Islam from the perspective of another faith, interested in the human spiritual search, or just keen to raise your level of knowledge of Islam and the Muslim world, this is a book to read, re-read and treasure.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh