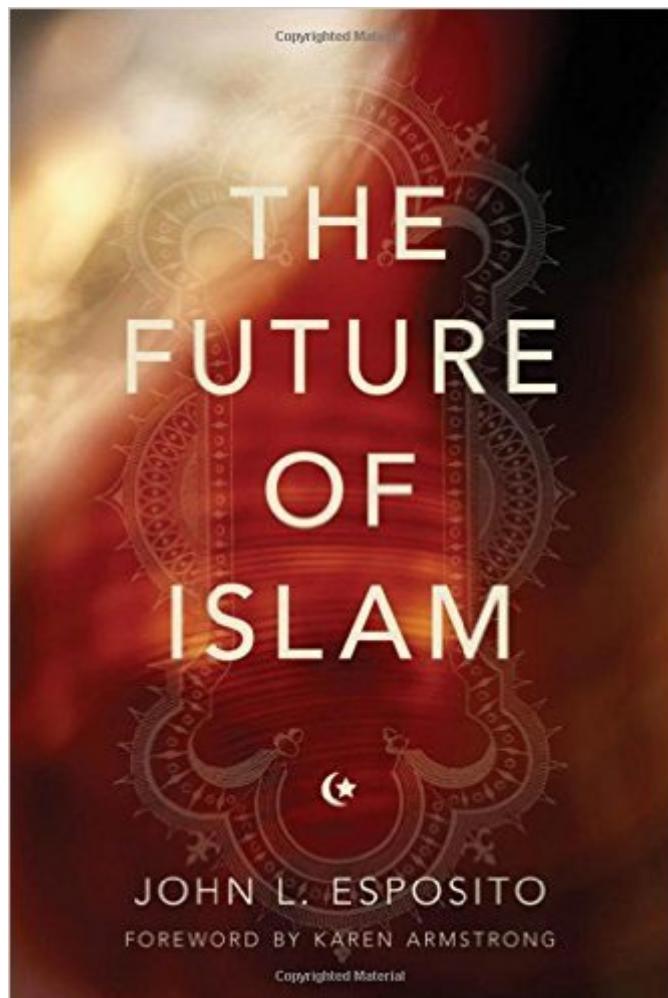


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The Future Of Islam



Synopsis

John L. Esposito is one of America's leading authorities on Islam. Now, in this brilliant portrait of Islam today--and tomorrow--he draws on a lifetime of thought and research to sweep away the negative stereotypes and provide an accurate, richly nuanced, and revelatory account of the fastest growing religion in the world. Here Esposito explores the major questions and issues that face Islam in the 21st century and that will deeply affect global politics. Are Islam and the West locked in a deadly clash of civilizations? Is Islam compatible with democracy and human rights? Will religious fundamentalism block the development of modern societies in the Islamic world? Will Islam overwhelm the Western societies in which so many Muslim immigrants now reside? Will Europe become Eurabia or will the Muslims assimilate? Which Muslim thinkers will be most influential in the years to come? To answer this last question he introduces the reader to a new generation of Muslim thinkers--Tariq Ramadan, Timothy Winter, Mustafa Ceric, Amina Wadud, and others--a diverse collection of Muslim men and women, both the "Martin Luthers" and the "Billy Grahams" of Islam. We meet religious leaders who condemn suicide bombing and who see the killing of unarmed men, women, and children as "worse than murder," who preach toleration and pluralism, who advocate for women's rights. The book often underscores the unexpected similarities between the Islamic world and the West and at times turns the mirror on the US, revealing how we appear to Muslims, all to highlight the crucial point that there is nothing exceptional about the Muslim faith. Recent decades have brought extraordinary changes in the Muslim world, and in addressing all of these issues, Esposito paints a complex picture of Islam in all its diversity--a picture of urgent importance as we face the challenges of the coming century.

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Customer Reviews

Dr. John Esposito's work, over many years, has attracted extreme responses. Right now, with the wounds of 9/11 and two wars still fresh in our American communities, anyone who takes a moderate stance on engaging Islam globally can become a target. So, in this review, I simply want to reflect journalistic responses to Dr. Esposito's latest book. First, the generally hard-nosed staff at the Financial Times declared the book a "handbook for this new age of engagement. Intolerant of the extremists bent on provoking a clash of civilizations--Western Islamophobes and violent Islamists alike--Esposito's book is a calculated appeal to the moderate middle ground." That's a staff widely respected around the world and that's their judgment. I agree. Now, you may take a strikingly different political stance than Dr. Esposito, but at least we should know what he's saying, since it has gained a great deal of interest in important places. Here's what the book is not: If you've already read a good number of Esposito books, you'll find that this book is not entirely new. He spends a good number of pages summarizing points he's made in other books and articles and talks. Also, if you're really looking for a good introductory look at Islam from Esposito's perspective, I would recommend *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*. That's a better overall "reader" as an introduction to Islam for new readers and also for small-group study and discussion. Here's what this book is: It truly is a kind of "guidebook," summarizing the past decade of Esposito's own research and insight. The book is, indeed, intended as a sharp-edged look at the dilemmas the world faces right now. There are, indeed, very bad players out there in the world, he argues in the book, and there also are moderates doing creative work as well. In a nutshell, he urges Americans to engage with moderates because the world's future hangs in the balance. If your group already knows something about Islam and global issues--or, if your small group really likes to roll up its sleeves and grapple with timely topics--then this book can spark some spirited discussion.

John Esposito, one of America's leading academic experts on Islam, offers an informed discussion of the voices of reform within the Islamic world, as well as an analysis of the present state of, and future prospects for, relations between Islam and the West. His study suggests that the elements for improved relations are there, but that it will require vision, concrete actions, and the willingness for all sides to listen to multiple voices and understand multiple experiences in order to avoid reinforcing stereotypes. The degree to which any of what Esposito says is new will depend on a reader's prior familiarity with Islam as a belief system, and with the history and politics of Muslim-majority

countries and the foreign policies of the US and European countries. And let it be said up front that Esposito is not a smooth writer. At times it seems like the book was rushed, and the whole thing could have used one more careful going-over by a good editor. Another gripe is that while Esposito relies a great deal on opinion polls at certain points (he is co-author of the 2007 book *Who Speaks for Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, published by Gallup), he does not explain how the polls were conducted, who responded to the poll questions, and what the limitations might be. Poll data can be fascinating, but without more methodological discussion than Esposito provides here (he provides none), they must be treated with some skepticism. Still, the editorial miscues and questions on the use of polls are not reasons to avoid reading the book. Esposito argues that the reemergence of Islam in politics is partly due to a decline in the attractiveness of Western examples (which seems reasonable enough, and after all it is each country's--and indeed each individual's--right to decide what examples are attractive). This, in turn, is partly because of the failures of Arab states led by Westernized elites. To those who may be seeking an answer to the question of why so many acts of terror are perpetrated by Muslims, Esposito does not offer a simple answer, though he does point to a number of important elements of an answer and to useful ways of looking at the question. He makes the obvious point that compared with the 1.5 billion Muslims in the world, the number who actually engage in terrorist activity, or who excuse such activity in the name of religion (as opposed to politics), is very small. I say this is an "obvious point," but it should not go unmentioned, since the headlines captured by terrorism have led many to conclude that Islam itself promotes violence as a fundamental tenet. Not only is this wrong, Esposito points out, but Muslims themselves are regularly the victims of violence perpetrated by Muslims. Indeed, before Islamist terrorism went global, it was primarily directed against governments in the Muslim world. Esposito's discussion of the connections among Islamic fundamentalism, local grievances, and global terrorism is a useful corrective to more simplistic diagnoses of the problem. Also useful is his discussion of the long tradition of reform and reinterpretation in Islam, including the effort to distinguish between what is essential to the faith and what are human accretions over time. This was less familiar to me, so it was particularly interesting. The internal debate suggests that the ways in which Islam is manifest in social and political behavior, as well as in any individual Muslim's life, are subject to change as external circumstances change. What he describes is in many ways the same tension between the universal and the particular that most religious traditions struggle with at some point. There are advocates of reform in Islam--lots of them--and some of them are quite influential. What they do not have is, first, the attention of the mainstream media in the West, and second, an organized religious structure through which to carry out reforms. It's not like Louis

Gerstner coming in and changing the culture of IBM when he became CEO. Not just in an organized, institutional, congregational sense, but also in terms of what Islam means in personal, communal, and political life, Esposito points out that "there is no monolithic Muslim world," any more than there is a monolithic West (politically and culturally), or a monolithic Christianity or Judaism. Islam as a group of adherents is only loosely organized, if organized at all. (Ask yourself this: Who is the president of Christianity? Who is the CEO of Judaism? Who tells all Buddhists or Hindus what to do? Exactly.) But in polls Muslims are far more likely to use Islamic values as a reason for criticizing terrorism than they are to use Islam to justify terror. Justifying violence is almost always done in terms of political/military reasons, with religion then used to make it appear that the response of the West (and especially the US) is anti-Muslim, and that therefore there is in fact a "war of civilizations." When it comes to the anti-Americanism that Esposito acknowledges is real and growing (and that anyone who has lived in Islam-dominated parts of the world has probably sensed), Esposito argues that it is American policies, not the American "way of life," that causes widespread feelings of antagonism toward America. But even this, he is quick to point out, is not the same as the extremism that leads to violence and terrorism, and which must not be excused or explained away. It is possible to be completely opposed to American policies and to be angry at what American projections of power have wrought, without hating Americans as individuals or disparaging American values. In fact, polling data reveal that most Muslims admire American values, but many are disappointed by what they see as the country's failure to live up to those values or to encourage adherence to them by their allies in Muslim-majority countries. Among the values that the vast mainstream Muslim population admires most is respect for the individual, for human rights, and for democratic institutions. Esposito is highly critical of the Bush Administration's rhetoric and its "war on terror," though he also reserves some criticism for shortcomings in Clinton-era policies as well. He has high hopes for the fresh start offered by Barack Obama's election, though it must be noted that the book was published in 2010, and work on it was probably finished in 2009, so all Esposito had to go on was the promise of a new beginning, since he was not in a position to pass judgment on the impact of Obama's policies--policies which, at least in the Middle East, have not produced successes to match the optimistic rhetoric. Esposito sees political liberalization as perhaps the most crucial need in the Muslim world in order to begin to address the long-term sources of the rage and violence that have gone global. "Without political liberalization," he argues, "the realities of most Muslim societies and the aspirations of their citizens . . . will continue to contribute to conditions that feed radicalization, political instability, and global terrorism" (p. 155). He concludes that "the fundamental problem for development and long-term stability in the

Arab and Muslim worlds is not the religion of Islam or Islamic movements but the struggle between authoritarianism and pluralism" (p. 196). What can America and other Western countries do? Esposito's suggestions can be summarized under two major categories: 1) adopt policies that address long-term disillusionment and anger (including support for authoritarian governments and a perception of bias in dealing with the Israel-Palestine issue), and 2) recognize and work to repair the damage done to reform efforts by lumping all Muslims into one category, and especially a primarily negative one. The West can help, and leaders and opinion makers in other religions should continue in their efforts to reach across religious divides and to encourage actions that lead to understanding rather than simply lofty pronouncements. The future of Islam depends primarily on decisions made by Muslims themselves, as individuals and as leaders, but given the fact that Islam and Christianity together account for over half the world's population, there is a lot at stake in joint efforts to ensure that the interface between these two Abrahamic religions and the populations that are grounded in their values is a positive one. (And this is before adding Judaism and other religions into the mix.) It may not be too much to say that the fate of all of us depends to some degree on what happens along these cultural and religious divides. This book is not without its problems, and it certainly does not provide any definitive answers to questions about Islam's future, but it is not a bad place to begin for someone who wants to understand some of the broad issues.

Esposito presents Islam as a sister religion to Judaism and Christianity and as equally diverse. He addresses the hot-button questions suspicious Westerners pose about Islam and Muslims. The books section headings include "Muslims in the West: Can They Be Loyal Citizens?" "Is Islam Capable of Reform?" and "What About Women's Rights?" The result is a sort of comparative religion catechism. Although Osama bin Laden and his ilk are given their space, Esposito devotes many more words to modernists and mainline Muslims. He also introduces Islam's "Billy Grahams", the several successful Muslim televangelists. Some scholars and secularists would say that Esposito's interpretation of Islam and Muslims today is too rosy. But he rightly shows that Islam itself and Muslims are not some strange and frightening "other".

The Future of IslamÂ Excellent book to learn objectively about Islam and help us get rid of the unjustified fear of Islam that is being spread by the media and right wing politicians

This book written by one of the foremost scholars gives a deep and very interesting view on Islam. Dr. Esposito is both frank and understanding regarding this religion, its tenets, problems with

modernism and the vast disparity in the thinking and practice of its followers. A great book for those who may really wish to take a serious unbiased look at Islam today and in the future.

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