

What everyone needs to know about Islam (Second Edition). By **John L. Esposito.** New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 268, ISBN: 978-0199794133.

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Since the destruction of twin towers and other properties on September 9, 2001, Islam has received increasing attention in the West from scholars of various persuasions. Most vocal in this respect has been the “Islamophobes” like Daniel Pipes, Bernard Lewis and others whose approach to Islam has generally been negative fostering fear and hatred of Islam and Muslims. Muslim scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman and others have tried to present Islam as peace-loving, progressive and pluralistic. However, there are some non-Muslim scholars who are sympathetic to Muslims and Islam and carry the burden of defending Islam especially in the West. John L. Esposito is the most vocal among these scholars. He is a Professor of International Affairs and Islamic Studies at Georgetown University and also the Director of Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. He has published many books and contributed many articles to international journals explaining Islam and defending Muslims against the charges of extremism and terrorism.

What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam is yet another attempt to explain Islam in an easily accessible language. The subtitle of the book loudly proclaims that it “provides answers to frequently asked questions, from one of America’s leading experts.” John Esposito wrote this book to “communicate” what Muslims believe and why they do what they do so as to “put an end to Islamophobia and the spiral of fear, hatred, and violence, spawned by ignorance” (p. 3).

The book under review is written in question and answer form, in seven chapters of varying length ranging between three and 66 pages. The short three page introductory chapter, “general information,” answers questions about what people need to know about Islam, whether Muslims form a monolithic whole, and the number of Muslims

and the places they live in. The longest chapter consuming 66 pages is titled "Faith" which answers about 32 questions concerning the fundamental pillars of Muslim faith, the origin of Islam, the status of the Prophet (SAW), and the like. The third chapter discusses the relationship between Islam and other world religions. The emphasis in this chapter, as in all others, has been to show the similarities between Islam and other monotheistic religions. Chapter four is about customs and cultures, the role and status of women in Islam and the dress code. Chapter five is titled "Violence and Terrorism" which explains largely the meaning of *jihād* and its globalisation resulting from several internal and external factors. Esposito points out that the Qur'ān urges Muslims to be "merciful and just." But some Muslim extremists distort the true nature of Islam (p. 138). This chapter deserves more space than is provided. Chapter six, "Society, Politics, and Economy", contains answers to questions concerning abortion, homosexuality, birth control, secularism, democracy, capitalism, banking, the charging of interest, and the like. Chapter seven deals with the question of Muslims living in the West and their adaptation to the American and European cultures. The book at the end contains a glossary of key terms and a six-page "Suggestions for further reading".

Given his desire to promote peace and cordiality between various faiths, Esposito not merely sketches the close historical and theological connections of Islam to other faiths like Judaism and Christianity but also explains, in a lucid manner, Muslim attitude towards the relationship between religion and politics, slavery and the like as well as their admiration for Jesus Christ as a mighty prophet. He also points out that there are many things Muslims practice which are not warranted by their religion but by their culture. Likewise, there are many fundamental concepts in Islam which are not properly understood by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. For instance, the term "*jihād*" has been mistaken to mean holy war. Citing the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), Esposito points out that warfare, in fact, is a lesser *jihād*. The real *jihād* is to fight against one's evil intentions and desires and to be constant in remembering Allah (SWT) and serving the humanity. Esposito also provides answers to such difficult yet often asked questions relating to Islam's compatibility with modernisation, capitalism and democracy; the respect and status accorded to women in Islam, and Qur'ānic injunctions concerning terrorism. On violence, Esposito is categorical. Islam permits violence in self-defence to protect one's family and/or faith.

The book was first published in 2003. It has been revised, updated and reissued avowedly to meet the growing needs of Western readers about Islam. It is written for the non-Muslims and especially geared towards American public. It is not an academic treatise but a primer on various aspects of Islam and on politico-cultural and economic factors that influence the views and behaviour of Muslims. It may be read by Muslims to further enhance their knowledge. Muslims, however, will frown at some of the comments like “Muhammad was attracted to and enjoyed the company of women as friends as well as espouses” (p. 16). They would also point to the error in Esposito’s comment that Qur’ān’s “chapters were assembled according to length, beginning with the longest chapter and ending with the shortest” (p. 9). The second chapter in the Qur’ān is the longest while the shortest chapter is numbered 108 (*Al-Kawthar*) which contains only three verses. There are also misleading interpretations of some Islamic injunctions to which Muslim scholars may object.

John Esposito emphasises commonality between Islam and other religions and gives Islam a liberal twist so that it fits in neatly with the socio-political views found in the West. He argues, as such, that Islam condemns acts of aggressive violence, that Islam supports human rights and social justice and that the democracy deficit and violation of human rights are due largely to the erroneous policies adopted by the West and their local agents. His primary motive in this and almost all other books he has authored is to ensure that *pluralism*, rule of law and respect for human rights championed in the West are sustained. A fine scholar, Esposito is of firm belief that a pluralistic, inclusive interpretation of Islam would enable Muslims and non-Muslims to live and interact in peace. He points out that “the world of Islam is global; ... Our common future demands a new, more inclusive sense of pluralism and tolerance built upon mutual understanding and respect” (p. xvi). This would require the Western public to stay away from reliance on media caricature and misrepresentation of Islam. This book should dispel some of those fears about Islam and Muslims. It, therefore, is a good book for most of the non-Muslims in the Western world most of whom hold on dearly to the stereotypes regarding Muslims and Arabs who live in their midst.
