
First Steps in Understanding

BY DALE F. WALKER

With very different approaches—an imaginative conversation among Muslim friends, a scholar’s survey of Islam’s development in the contemporary world, and a distinguished Muslim intellectual’s treatment of the faith—the three books reviewed here enlighten the uninitiated into the ways of Islam.

In the last several years, and for obvious political reasons, there has been a burgeoning interest in Islam. A good number of books have been written that aim to enlighten the uninitiated into the ways and meaning of the Muslim faith. The three books reviewed here range in emphasis from providing the basics, to giving a more intellectual treatment of the faith, to offering a systematic treatment of Islam’s development in the context of an ever-changing modern world. They are books I have found to be very helpful.

John Esposito is director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, and has written and edited many books on Islam. In *Islam: The Straight Path*, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 286pp., \$31.95), he gives us a general introduction to Islam, providing what is probably the most widely used university text on this subject. The book has the added advantage that its presentation seems to be acceptable to many Muslims. Esposito dispels the common notion that Islam is always the same in every place. “Monotheistic has not meant monolithic,” he notes, for the “unity of Islam, from its early formation to contemporary developments, has encompassed a diversity of interpretations and expressions of faith” (p. 252).

The coverage of Esposito’s book tends to be encyclopedic; he has something to say about everything. I find it valuable as a reference work; many

names and movements that one might want to look up are represented somewhere in this book. The writing is not pedantic, though with such wide coverage, a lot of detail has to be omitted. The attentive reader will learn from this book, and be able to add detail from further reading.

Esposito begins with the origins of Islam—including the role of Muhammad, the Qur'an, and the basic beliefs found there—extremely compressed into a chapter of thirty-one pages. This is foundational, since "Muslims today, as in the past, continue to affirm that the Qur'an is the literal word of God, the Creator's immutable guidelines for an otherwise transient world" (p. 31). There follows a chapter on Muslim history, largely political, which will be the most difficult chapter for the uninitiated to follow. Next he turns to belief and practice, with discussion of theological movements, Islamic law and its development in the tradition, the "five pillars" of religious practice (profession of faith, worship/prayer, almsgiving, fasting, pilgrimage), then family law and custom. Further topics in this chapter are Sufism, the mystic path, and some attention to Shi'ite history and practices.

A chapter is given to modern interpretations of Islam, discussed more extensively than in many introductory books. Included here are various forms of revivalism and modernism, and the interplay between them. The longest and most detailed chapter of the book deals with questions of religion and politics in contemporary Islam. Esposito discusses aspects of the resurgence of Islam since 1950, and details developments in Egypt, Libya, Iran, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. This part of the book, of course, is the most dated, and needs to be supplemented from other sources, not only for the more recent history of these areas, but for developments in other important nations of the Muslim world. Indonesia, for instance, with the largest Muslim population of any country, is not mentioned at all. There are further sections on Islam and the West, African-American Islam, and questions of Islamic identity in areas where Muslims are a minority.

A final chapter deals with possibilities of change, modernization, legal reform, and women's rights, against the backdrop of struggles among traditionalists, modern secular movements, and revivalism throughout the Muslim world. Esposito's sympathies are clear: "A new alternative exists today.... It is modern educated but Islamically oriented, committed to the transformation of state and society through nonviolent means from the bottom up" (pp. 249-250).

Esposito's book is weighted definitely towards contemporary expressions of Islam. But these are elaborated very much in terms of their historical development, and we see clearly how present-day struggles are grounded in Islamic origins.

Sayyed Hossein Nasr is an Iranian Muslim who has lived in the United States since 1979. He was trained in science, but has been a prolific writer and thinker in philosophy and theology. As a leading figure in the intellec-

tual world today, he speaks for what he calls the “traditionalist” view of Islam.

Despite its subtitle, Nasr’s book *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003; 198 pp., \$12.95) is not really about Islamic history and civilization. The main chapters show Islam as religion. Islam is presented as the purest form of religion, fulfilling the longing for meaning planted in the human heart. The foundations of the faith are the Qur’an, “the verbatim Word of God revealed to the Prophet” (p. 37), together with the ancillary Qur’anic sciences and commentaries, the Prophet, “the perfect man par excellence and the beloved of God, whom the Qur’an calls an excellent model to emulate” (p. 46), and the Hadith, which “deals with nearly every human question, from details of legal significance to the most exalted moral and spiritual teachings” (p. 56).

Nasr discusses the doctrines of Islam concerning God, prophecy and revelation, the angelic world, the human state, man and woman, the cosmos, and eschatology, and then describes the Shari’a (the Divine Law) and Sufism (the spiritual path). The next chapter covers the practices, ethics, and institutions of Islam: the five pillars, jihad as spiritual vigilance, plus specific Shi’ite practices of mourning the martyrdom of Ali and pilgrimage to the tombs of the Imams. Islamic ethics are touched on in terms of family, social structure, and economics. Political institutions are historically the Caliphate, or leadership of the Islamic community, and the authority of the Ulama, the religious scholars.

A thumbnail sketch of Islamic history comes next, summarizing the main lines of Muslim history in Western Asia as well as the development of Islam in other parts of the world. But Nasr is more interested in the schools of thought in Islam, discussing the development of kalam (or, Islamic scholastic theology), metaphysics and gnosis, and philosophy and theosophy.

This chapter tends to be encyclopedic, not much more than a bare listing of names and movements which will mean little to people who are not already well-read

in these areas. In the closing chapter, Nasr tries to situate his own “traditionalist” position, which he claims as the majority position in Islam, over against modernism and fundamentalism, both of which, he says, “in certain lands have caused traditional Islamic life to wither, but have been unable to create any significant theological worldview that could challenge the traditional one” (p. 174).

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It is obvious that Nasr's book is not a general introduction to Islam in the sense that Esposito's is. Instead, Nasr gives us a testimony of faith, a passionate appeal for a particular religiocentric worldview. We find ourselves in a totally different world. Its closest parallels might be the theological disputations of the seventeenth-century west before the impact of the modern world set in, or the worldview concerns in a very traditional Bible college that is pretty much oblivious to the secularized world around it.

This critique should not be taken as negative. Nasr's world is very coherent, even appealing, and he writes about it in very interesting ways. His voice is important, and his book should be read as an *apologia* for what may very well be majority views among reflective Muslims. Nasr does talk about change, mentioning some types of reform in Christianity and Judaism, but adds: "Islam, however, has not undergone, nor is it likely to undergo in any appreciable degree, the same kinds of transformation either juridically or theologically" (p. 173). I am not so sure that even traditionalist Islam can remain aloof from the secularizing modern world.

Roland E. Miller, who is not nearly as well known as the other two authors, is a Canadian who lived in India for many years, has written widely on Islam, and been a leader in promoting Muslim-Christian dialogue. His *Muslim Friends: Their Faith and Feeling: An Introduction to Islam* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1995; 429 pp., \$20.99) includes generous use of quotation, especially from the sources.

Miller, like Nasr, focuses on the religious aspects of Islam. He summarizes Islamic history, but makes little mention of the political dimensions and worldwide manifestations of Islam today. For that we have to go back to Esposito. Instead, Miller concentrates on contemporary belief and practice, giving much more detail than the other two books. Especially valuable is his discussion of the yearly festivals and the rites of passage.

Though an outsider, Miller writes as much as possible from the insider point of view, narrating the faith through the eyes of "Abdulla and Amina," typical Muslim friends in India. Every religious expression "has a double dimension—the bare fact itself, and what it means for the believer," Miller explains. "On the human level it is friendship that provides the most ready access to the realm of personal meaning. It is to friends that we ordinarily express our deepest feelings, our hopes and fears, our inner faith" (pp. 14-15). Thus Miller tries to share the experiences and feelings that these friends would normally have. For example, in discussing belief in God, he begins with narrating how the "Reality of God" impacts the lives of his friends, using this as the springboard to discuss the Muslim affirmations about God, the Divine Names and attributes.

This narrative device works very well, for in effect it puts the emphasis on Islamic practice by ordinary people, rather than on the scholarly analysis of a belief system. In introducing a short overview of Islamic history,

Miller shows that while his friends “do not know the intricacies of the Muslim story, they do know the names of some of its main characters, they resonate to some of its events, and they glory in the high points of its cultural splendor” (p. 331).

Miller reports the differing views among Muslims. In discussing the concept of jihad, for instance, he writes about Qur’anic teachings, classical interpretations, contemporary views—moderate and radical, and the internal Muslim debates over this issue. We gain a sense of the ferment within Islam today. Miller, however, always comes back to the personal. He summarizes the hopes and fears which he sees in his friends: “Abdulla and Amina are doing their best as they concentrate on and engage in the daily struggles of life. Their attempt is to find in the here and now a portion of the peace that comes from surrendering to God... [confident that] God does not only invite to the House of Peace, but He also gives guidance on the path that will lead to it” (pp. 392-393).

Since coming across Miller’s book, I have assigned it as the first reading in classes on Islam. Students like it very much, and it provides a good foundation for further study. I would recommend starting with Miller, then reading Nasr to get a Muslim intellectual’s views of the same material. Finally Esposito should be added, giving background to the contemporary political issues so important in our world today.



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