Book Reviews

Review Article

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The tragic events of September 11 mark a new phase in the history of “Muslim-West” relations. Since then a spate of books has been appearing on the subject all over the world. Innumerable articles have been written and countless seminars and conferences have been held. In these more or less the same set of questions about the relations between the Muslims and the West were raised and a variety of answers were given.

A majority of these books are hostile to Muslims and only a few of them show a degree of sympathy and understanding. At times, however, the sympathisers, who do not necessarily have an in-depth knowledge of Islam and Muslims are a cause of greater concern than those that are hostile. In the midst of all this hostility that seems to surround Islam and Muslims, we also come across some powerful voices giving vent to their concern about the obtaining situation. Naturally, many are of Muslims themselves but there are of some others as well. These ‘others’ really understand the faith, history and culture of Muslims and have the courage to say what they believe do much good when they relate all what they know with the present situation and introduce insight and perception to the discourse on Muslims and the West.

It is no exaggeration to say that John Esposito, a leading American expert on Islam, is one of such ‘others’ whose approach is being increasingly appreciated. This can be said especially after the appearance of his well-articulated, simple, and well-timed book, *What Everyone Needs to Know About*
Islam. John Esposito is well-known as the author of *Islam: The Straight Path*¹ and *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality.*² He is also known as the editor of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Modern Islam*³ i.e. World and the *Oxford History of Islam*⁴ and of a number of other acclaimed works on Islam. His works on contemporary Islam are among the most widely read on the subject. His relations with Islam and Muslims are characterised by understanding and his encounters with them are noted for being based on mutual sympathy and respect. He is counted among the few who are capable of reading the minds of Muslims in the context of their accumulated experience throughout their history.

Esposito’s *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam* is among the major attempts in the West since 9/11 to clarify the major misconceptions about, and to present an insightful view of, Islam. In this exciting book Esposito has utilized the interesting, web-based methodology of FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions). At the very outset Esposito brings out the reasons for writing this book:

* Islam is the second largest religion in the world (after Christianity) and will soon be the second largest religion in America.
* Muslims are and will increasingly be our neighbors, colleagues at work, and fellow citizens.
* Although Islam is similar in many ways to Judaism and Christianity, most Americans and European think of Muslims as strange, foreign, and frightening, inevitably linked to headline terrorist events. This state of affairs needs to change and can change with better information and deeper understanding.
* We must put an end to the spiral of fear, hatred, and violence, spawned by ignorance, that no longer only afflicts other countries but has come home to America (p. 1).

Divided into seven chapters of unequal length, each tackling a number of very thoughtful and frequently asked questions about Islam and Muslims, the author has succeeded in giving answers that are at once sympathetic, comprehensive and lucid. The answers relate to a host of questions under the following titles which form the chapters of the book.

1. General Information;
2. Faith and Practice;

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3. Islam and other Religions;
4. Customs and Culture;
5. Violence and Terrorism;
6. Society, Politics, and Economy; and
7. Muslims in the West.

The book ends with a concise glossary listing over a hundred technical terms.

The author has employed a comparative methodology in presenting his views. He avoids sweeping generalizations and takes due care to show due regard to Muslim sensibilities.

Notwithstanding these positive qualities of the book, it may be pointed out that at a few places the reader finds himself at odds with the author’s approach. On p. 76, for instance, the following question is asked: “Why do Muslims persecute Christians in Muslim countries?” Unfortunately the way the question is put seems to be a departure from the author’s approach to things. For the question itself assumes that Muslims do persecute Christians in Muslim countries. Had the question been: “Do Muslims persecute Christians in Muslim countries?” it would have been more in keeping with the spirit of the book. One is reminded of the notorious question: “Have you given up beating you wife?” Likewise, some statements in the book need to be verified and some others to be corrected. The author’s assertion that “Women have been assigned second-class status in Islam” (p. 90) is downright preposterous and comes as a surprise from a person of Esposito’s stature.

The book not only embodies direct answers to specific questions, but also demonstrates a high degree of scholarship spanning the whole field of Islamic studies. This is in addition to its being couched in a style that is to the point, vivid, marked by clarity of thought and profundity of knowledge. The author displays these characteristics also in several other works of his. This is especially true with regard to another recent book, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (2002). *Unholy War* with about 200 odd pages including an index and four pages of useful glossary is one of the most illuminating books that I have come across on an array of subjects such as the relationship between religion and politics, the so-called Islamic threat, Muslim terrorism, political Islam and the extremist groups in the Muslim world.

The book consists of 4 chapters: “The Making of the Modern Terrorist” (pp. 3–25), “Jihad and Struggle for Islam” (pp. 26–70), “The Armies of God” (pp. 71–117) and “Where do we go from Here” (pp. 118–160). The author attempts to analyse the phenomenon of terrorism alongside studying its roots, philosophical foundations, historical developments, and contemporary
manifestations. The book has been written with the a clear purpose which has been clearly stated in the ‘preface’ where the author says:

I have written this book for the vast majority of people in the West, non-Muslims as well as Muslims, whose lives and communities in the twenty-first century are inextricably intertwined. The Muslim world is no longer “out there”. Muslims are our neighbors, colleagues and fellow citizens, and their religion, like Judaism and Christianity, rejects terrorism. Never before have soft phrases like “building bridges of understanding” been more critical in a war that ultimately cannot be won simply by military power. Understanding and action go hand in hand for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. All of us are challenged to move beyond stereotypes, historic grievances, and religious differences, to recognize our shared values as well as interests, and to move collectively to build our common future (p. xi).

With this idea in mind the author embarks on a serious analysis of the issue of “Unholy War”, and attempts to answer the very pertinent questions which were raised immediately after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, especially: “Why do they hate us?” The book is a timely one for all including the westerners and more so for the Americans whose knowledge of Islam, of the vast majority of Muslims, and Islam’s connections with the Judeo-Christian tradition leaves much to be desired. The Christians today tend to perceive resemblances with the Jews and speak of a Judeo-Christian tradition, while they present Islam at best as a foreign, non-Western religion which is often grouped with Hinduism and Buddhism. The fact that Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, has its origins in the Middle East, that it affirms belief in the Hereafter, that it venerates the Prophets of the Old and New Testaments including Abraham, Moses and Jesus, regrettably seems unknown to the vast majority of people.

Chapter one of the book, “The Making of the Modern Terrorist”, is a clear and lucid presentation of Osama bin Laden’s life and a brief historical background of the factors that helped him to forsake the luxuries of life to reside in war-torn Afghanistan. To give the reader an idea of the depth of the chapter, suffice it to say that Saudi Arabia, the Jamīyyat i-Ulamā-i-Islām (sic), Ayman al-Zawahri, Sudan, Afghanistan and Taliban, Omar Abdel Rahman of Egypt, all come under discussion. An interesting point to note is that when Osama bin Laden felt the threat of Saddam he wrote to King Fahd offering him the recruitment of “Arab Afghans” to defend the Kingdom — an offer that was turned down practically by inviting American forces which proved a turning point in the globalisation of Osama’s ideology and network. The author’s presentation successfully portrays Osama and interestingly highlights that his above stated offer and the resultant frustration by its non-acceptance
have probably contributed to much that he did subsequently. While appreciating Esposito’s treatment of the chapter as a whole, one feels that he displays being under a greater degree of Western scholarly influence than some of his admirers outside the cultural and political orbit of the West would have wanted him to be. One feels this particularly when one finds Esposito not fully recognising the underlying Islamic roots of the Afghan Jihad against foreign occupation, virtually treating Islam only as a factor that contributed to the unification of the otherwise fragile Afghan tribal society comprising Pushtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras and helped to reduce the religious tensions between Sunni Muslim majority and the Shi’i minority.

Chapter 2 of the book is a brief, albeit intelligent survey of the concept of jihād in Islam. Although it is a chapter to be lauded, one must point out that the comparative methodology, which lies at the heart of the author’s treatment in his What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam? is less visible in his treatment of jihād. One also misses the critical, historical analysis in what Esposito terms as the “Early Expansional Wars” of Islam.

The author has succeeded, however, in grasping the essential meaning of jihād and its manifestation throughout Muslim history to the present day. Still his emphasis on economic reward over the ‘faith’ (p.33) — though en passant — leaves a bad taste in the mouth. So is his omission to discuss Dār al-Šūl or Dār al-‘Abd in the context of his discussion of Dār al-Islām and Dār al-Ḥarb (p.35). A detailed discussion of the concept of Dār al-Šūl could have thrown more light on the nature and attitude of Islam to non-Islamic states. This is an issue which is very relevant not only to the contemporary world but also to the subject matter of the book.

This chapter, however, shows the author’s profound knowledge of the history of Islam and of the different theological and political trends within it. It also demonstrates his acquaintance with the contemporary Islamic world and the factors that have shaped it. Esposito would have done much better only if he had access to the brilliant book called al-Jihād fi ’l-Islām5 by one of the greatest living Muslim jurists of our time, Dr Muhammad Sa’dīd Rama’n al-Būt, Syria.

“Armies of God” which is the most delicate of all the chapters of the book deals with the practical concerns of all Muslims and non-Muslims—politicians, religious leaders, laymen and bureaucrats. A mere descriptive presentation is understandable in view of the sensitive nature of the issues discussed in the chapter, but at times it confuses the reader. One instance that comes to mind is “Egypt and the Rage of God” (pp. 85–94). For here on

occasions the author ignores the other side of the story as in the case of the country-wide protests against Anwar al-Sādāt (d. 1981). Although there might have been millions of people in Egypt who opposed Sādāt, yet the fact remains that the pro-Sādāt demonstrations, though undoubtedly organized by the government machinery, were much larger and much more visible all over Egypt at that time and I myself witnessed it.

“Jihad in Palestine” (pp. 94–102) is somewhat critical for an American writer. The author must be applauded for his courage to discuss the issue but its true and definitive analysis is missing. If the dictum that “failure to clarify a thing when it is mandatory to do so is blameworthy” is valid then the author cannot be excused for not being able to demonstrate the Israeli absurdities and atrocities and for not stating the Palestinian side of the story in its fullness.

Despite all this, the chapter touches the core of the reality when it describes the Muslim response to the Western countries. If crises of identity, legitimacy, power and authority are the main problems of the modern Muslim states in addition to the seemingly unending economic problems, the author has very rightly established, although indirectly, that lack of clear vision on the part of the Muslims lies at the heart of the crisis with which they are faced. The author might also have a point when he states that “the Wahhabi vision... was fueled by petro-dollars especially the wealth from skyrocketing revenues after the 1973 oil embargo” (p. 106; see also p.108). In almost the same vein, the author argues in an unqualified manner about the Wahhabi influence on Ṭalibān and the madrasah system of education in Pakistan which is highly questionable. For what we know factually is that the Ṭalibān and the numerous madrasahs which were affiliated to them or their ideology and were active in the politics of Ṭalibān were strict Ḥanafis belonging to the Deobandi school of the Sub-continent. These, as we know well, espouse doctrinal positions different from those of the Wahhabis.

However, the chapter with the two preceding ones has been successful in presenting the case of “Unholy War” or “Terror” in the name of Islam to non-Muslims and westerners, especially Americans.

The fourth chapter titled “Where Do We Go from Here?” deals with very crucial questions. Is there a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West? “Why do they hate us?” Is there a direct connection between Islam, anti-Americanism and global terrorism? Are Islam and modernity compatible?

Whereas the earlier chapters were of a descriptive nature and not too challenging, in the fourth chapter the author is encountered with a real test. Esposito makes it clear that the mainstream Islam, in law and in theology as well as in practice, in the end has always rejected or marginalized extremists and terrorists from the Kharijites and Assassins to contemporary radical
movements such as al-Qaeda (p. 128). The desire of the author expressed as: “Improving our understanding of the faith of our fellow citizens and neighbors will require that we look at Muslims with new eyes and judge Islam by the totality and teaching of the faith, not just the beliefs and practices of a radical few” (p. 120) is well said. The steps that the author proposes for achieving this goal are bold and revolutionary given the state of ignorance such as the one confessed by an American Senate leader: “I know a lot about many things but nothing about Islam and the Muslim world—and neither do most of my colleagues” (p. 120), or the attitude of those who are ignorant and don’t want to listen in order to correct themselves, epitomizing the saying: “my mind’s made up, don’t confuse me with the facts!” (p. 120).

If this chapter is considered the main chapter to achieve the purpose for which the entire book was written, one might question the extent of its success. For the chapter does not discuss the dimensions that ought to have been elaborated upon, even if sparingly, such as the reason why Muslims “hate” Americans, or the American foreign policy and the American political attitude towards Muslims, etc. A chapter meant to educate the American public and to send a clear message to policy makers to revise their policies ought not to have been as vague as the subtitle: “Reacting to Terrorism: American Foreign Policy in the Muslim world”.

Although welcome in its spirit and noble in its aim, the author is seemingly torn between the tradition of western scholarship and his sincere call to his compatriots to get rid of their favourite stereotypes. This is evident from his long discussion of issues such as “is Islam compatible with modernisation” and “are Islam and capitalism compatible?” The author’s discussion of Samuel Huntington is brief, but excellent (pp. 126–133). His rejection of Huntington’s thesis and his identification of its weaknesses do not prevent the author from seeing things in depth which leads him to write: “Ironically the clash of culture appears as evident with reference to our allies in the Muslim world as with our enemies. Whatever the common economic and political interests, primarily centered on oil, the contrasts between Saudi Arabia and the United States are as stark” (p. 127). Nor does he lose sight of the complications and complexities of the problem, and his ideas on this issue (pp. 127–29) make an excellent reading and are highly thought provoking. At about the end of the chapter he gives the following piece of advice to Muslims:

If western powers need to rethink, reassess foreign policies and their support for authoritarian regimes the mainstream Muslims world wide will need to more aggressively address the threat to Islam from religious extremists. Their jihad or struggle will be religious, intellectual, spiritual and moral. But it must be a more rapid and widespread program of Islamic renewal that builds on past reformers
but that follows the lead of enlightened religious leaders and intellectuals today more forcefully, and that more effectively engages in a wide-ranging process of re-interpretation (ijtihad) and reform. There are formidable obstacles to be overcome — the conservatism of many (though not all) ulama, reform in the training of religious scholars and leaders, the countering of more puritanical exclusivist Wahhabi or Salafi brand of Islam, and the discrediting of the militant jihadist ideas and ideologies (p. 158).

All in all Unholy War is a balanced treatment of the subject of terror in the name of Islam and an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the Muslim world and the West, particularly America in the past and the present and an agenda for a more constructive and positive co-existence on the basis of “Judeo-Christian-Islamic” or Abrahamic tradition. Thus the book is a milestone in the western literature on Islam, especially in the aftermath of September 11.

Karen Armstrong in her book Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet (1995)6 — a book that represents a deep insight into the faith of a people other than her own— states that:

... the barriers of geographical distance, hostility and fear which once kept the religions in separate watertight compartments are beginning to fall ... but one major religion seems to be outside this circle of goodwill and, in the west at least, to have retained its negative image. People who are beginning to find inspiration in Zen or Taoism are usually not really so eager to look kindly upon Islam, even though it is the third religion of Abraham and more in tune with our own Judeo-Christian tradition. In the west we have a long history of hostility towards Islam that seems as entrenched as our anti-semitism ... but the old hatred of Islam continues to flourish on both sides of the Atlantic and people have few scruples about attacking this religion, even if they know little about it.7

Let us hope that Esposito’s work, Unholy War and What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam would be lasting contributions in the removal of this hatred; not only because they deal with some of the most crucial problems faced by the world, particularly by the Muslims, but also because they come from the pen of a man who has proved through his various writings on Islam and through his long association with Muslims, his deep insight into the Muslim mind and the Islamic tradition, especially in the contemporary world.


7 Ibid., 10.