

The Future of Islam

John L. Esposito

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For John L. Esposito, writing on Islam and Muslim politics has been both a “profession and a vocation” for over three decades. Thus this book is a “culmination” of his work and experience, wherein one finds a sea change in just few decades, as “Islam and Muslim politics have moved from offstage to center stage” (p. 4). Thus one witnesses “an explosion of interest in and coverage of Islam” (p. 4) and Muslims because both are now political as well as religious matters of interest. In fact, Islam is considered “not only a faith ... [but] also an ideology and worldview that informs Muslim politics and society” (p. 4). *The Future of Islam* is about “all of our future,” and through this book Esposito wants to tell the story of “how we got to where we are and what we need to understand and do to create ... ‘a new way forward’” (p. 6).

This new edition seeks to understand the struggle for reform in Islam and Muslim societies in order to “explore the religious, cultural, and political diversity of Muslims facing daunting challenges in Muslim countries in the west, to clarify the debate and dynamics of Islamic reform, to examine the attempt to combat religious extremism and terrorism, and to look into the future of Muslim-West relations” (p. 3). Divided into four main chapters, it is preceded by Karen Armstrong’s foreword, a preface, and an introduction. It ends with a precise but perceptive and discerning conclusion.

Chapter 1, “The Many Faces of Islam and Muslims,” briefly introduces Islam and Muslims, as well as Islam in/and the West. Here, the author points out that while we often speak of “Islam,” in fact “many Islams or interpretations of Islam exist” and thus its images and realities, as well as those of the Muslims, are multiple and diverse in both religio-cultural and politico-economic terms (p. 11). He also brings into focus the fact that Islam, like other faiths, has historically been a “source not only of compassion, morality, and virtue but also of terror, injustice, and oppression” (p. 12).

Chapter 2, “God in Politics,” provides the background and context for understanding political Islam, the role of religion in politics and society, and Islam’s impact upon Muslim societies and the West. Esposito examines the reinsertion of Islam into Muslim politics and society in an attempt to analyze its impact and global implications and also to answer such questions as “What is political Islam?” and “Are all Islamic movements a threat?”

For him, contemporary Muslims face the twofold challenge of religious and political reform, both of which are integral to developing Muslim communities and marginalizing and containing religious extremism and terrorism. In his words, the ongoing challenge is “to formulate and implement doctrinal and educational reforms” and “to emphasize inclusive rather than exclusive theologies, theologies that foster mutual understanding, respect, and religious pluralism” (pp. 86-87).

Chapter 3, “Islam Needs a Reformation,” offers the views of such contemporary reformers as Tariq Ramadan, Amr Khaled, Sheikh Ali Goma’a, Mustafa Ceric, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Nurcholish Madjid, Timothy Winter, Farhat Hashemi, Amina Wadud, Heba Raouf, and Abdullah Gymnastiar. Esposito opens this chapter by remarking that “Is Islam capable of reform?” and “Are there Islamic reformers?” are both “strange, even absurd” (pp. 88-89) because the issue is not “whether there will be change, but rather *how much and what kind*” of change is needed and necessary. For him, all of the “major world religions have changed and continue to change.” Moreover, given human nature and humanity’s dynamic historical and social context, “*change is inevitable*” (p. 89; italics mine). Esposito states that although these intellectuals have addressed the “role of Islam in contemporary society” (p. 89), a major challenge remains: the “importance of linking, of showing continuity, between proposed changes and long-held Islamic beliefs and traditions” (p. 94).

In Chapter 4, “America and the Muslim World: Building a New Way,” Esposito analyzes the challenges of Islamophobia, failed American foreign and domestic policies, the roles of militant Christian Zionists and the media, and the continued threat posed by religious extremism and terrorism. He also throws light on interfaith and inter-civilizational dialogue, such initiatives as the Amman Message and “A Common Word” (see pp. 186-91), and the role of public diplomacy in a new paradigm that can restore the United States’ image and role in the Muslim world.

In her foreword, Karen Armstrong supports Esposito’s words and posits that the “future of Islam does not simply depend on the effectiveness of a few Muslim reformers, but that the United States and Europe also have a major role to play” (p. xi).

The book’s conclusion contains some strong statements, among them the following:

- Contemporary Muslims stand at “major crossroads” and thus struggle with how to live out and apply their faith in a rapidly changing world (p. 195).

- Reform-minded Muslims are working to articulate a “progressive, constructive Islamic framework” to deal with modernization and development, leadership and ideology, democratization and pluralism, and foreign policy (p. 195).
- 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; italics mine).
- The future of Islam and the relationship between the Muslim world and the West remain key political and religious issues. Inter-civilizational dialogue is no longer simply the preserve of religious leaders and scholars, but is now “a priority for policymakers and corporate leaders, a subject of domestic and foreign policy, and the agenda for international organizations” (p. 198).
- It is necessary to recognize that the “Children of Abraham” comprise Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Given this reality, it is also time to stop speaking of a Judeo-Christian heritage and to begin speaking of a Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage, for the three religions have a shared history and tradition. Therefore, steps should be taken to add this “missing link” (p. 198) to the existing religious framework.
- The future of Islam and Muslims is “inextricably linked to all of humanity. All of our futures will depend on working together for good governance, for freedom of religion, speech, and assembly, and for economic and educational advancement” (p. 199).

In sum, proposing the way forward for a better future for Islam, Muslims, and the West, *The Future of Islam* is very insightful, lucid, and comprehensive. I strongly recommend this work to all those interested in knowing about the past, present, and future of Islam, Muslims, and the relationship between the Muslim world and the West.

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