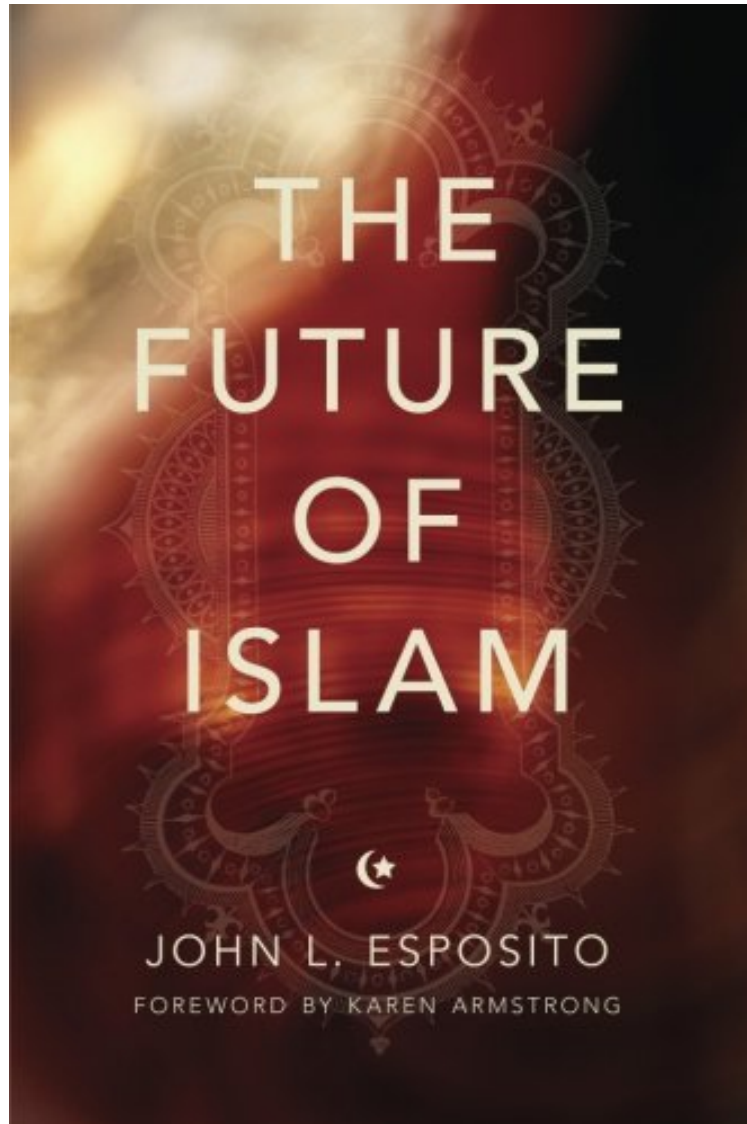


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## The Future of Islam

*John L. Esposito*

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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.

.com 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 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: Is Islam compatible with modern notions of democracy, rule of law, gender equality, and human rights? How representative and widespread is Islamic fundamentalism and the threat of global terrorism? Can Muslim minority communities be loyal citizens in America and Europe? The book also turns the mirror on the US and Europe, revealing how we appear to Muslims. Recent decades have brought extraordinary changes in the Muslim world, and in addressing 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. John L. Esposito and Karen Armstrong: Author One-to-One Karen Armstrong is the author of numerous works on comparative religion, including the critically-acclaimed *The Case for God*. She spoke with John L. Esposito about Western perceptions of Muslims and the issues facing the world's fastest growing religion. Armstrong: How did you view Islam before you began to study it seriously? How did study affect your understanding of Muslim faith and culture? Esposito: Growing up in Brooklyn, NY, surrounded by Italian Catholic neighbors, I knew little about the one Irish girl in my class, and much less about Arabs or Islam who were invisible in the American landscape. And what I did know (much of it, I discovered later, was the product of bias and stereotypes) did not attract me to these strangers. In addition, since most theology and religion departments did not teach Islam, the prospect of getting a teaching position in this area were indeed bleak. When the department chair of religion at Temple encouraged me to take a course in Islam with a newly hired Muslim professor, I declined. However, he was gently adamant and I, reflecting on my precarious position as a grad student, finally agreed to take just one course. When I first encountered Islam in graduate school, I was astonished to discover that Islam was another Abrahamic faith. While the Judeo-Christian connection was well known, no one ever mentioned a Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. Why? If Muslims recognize and revere many of the major patriarchs and prophets of Judaism and Christianity (including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus) and Gods revealed books, the Torah and the Message (Gospels) of Jesus, why had I not been aware of these similarities after all my years of liberal arts and theological training? Armstrong: Western feelings about Islam have certainly intensified since 9/11. But do you think that the Western perception of Islam has fundamentally changed? If so, how has it changed? If not, why not? Esposito: There certainly has been more coverage of Islam and Muslims are more visible in the public square. However, during the past decade continued terrorist attacks, the sharp politicization among experts and political commentators, the influence of neocons and the hardline Christian Right have fed a significant increase in anti-Islam and anti-Muslim (Islamophobia) attitudes and policies. The Gallup World Poll and other major polls have demonstrated the impact on public opinion. When Americans were asked in 2007 what they admire about Islam, 57% (that figure dropped to 53% in 2009) said nothing or I don't know. The critical missing link in our information and the key question in understanding Muslims ought to be What do Muslims globally, the mainstream majority, really think? To chart a new way forward, we in the West need to know not only what experts and pseudo-experts say about Muslim attitudes, beliefs, grievances, hopes, fears, and desires but also and most importantly what the often silenced Muslim majority have to say. I believe we will discover many commonalities in their values, hopes and dreams. At the same time, there has been an exponential growth in information and knowledge regarding Islam and Muslims, in books and media. It's not clear that this has led to greater understanding. Toward that end I have seen an increase in inter-civilizational and inter-religious dialogue initiatives and media and popular culture projects that reach a broad audience, especially youth who are the future of Islam. Armstrong: What are the particular

challenges that Islam faces in the modern world? Esposito: The first challenge is time. In contrast to Christian reforms that grew out of and were influenced primarily by conditions in the West over several centuries, Islam and Muslims have decades, not centuries, to make significant progress in a globalizing world characterized by Western political, military, and economic hegemony. Secondly, many Muslims today pursue reform not from a position of power and strength but from one of relative weakness, struggling for change in the face of authoritarianism and repression, limited freedom of speech and the press, and in some cases war and terror. Armstrong: What do you find most hopeful in current Muslim thinking? Esposito: Post 9/11, the call to reform Islam, to strengthen its relevance in a rapidly changing twenty-first-century world, has intensified. If some say that Islam is a perfect religion that doesn't need to change or adapt, many others stress that Islam is inherently dynamic and that reinterpretation and reform are critical in the struggle to respond to the demands of our times, to marginalize extremists, and to promote gender equality, religious pluralism, and human rights. This debate has been intensified by a modern technology and mass communications and by the growth of religious extremism and terrorism in the name of Islam. An influential group of vibrant Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders, from Africa to Asia, from Europe to America, have addressed the role of Islam in contemporary society: How do religion and Islamic law contribute to the modern nation-state? Where do Islamic values apply to key issues of today, like democracy, secularism, gender equality, human rights, free market economies, modern banking? What is the role of the clergy (ulama); are they the preeminent authoritative voices who speak for Islam? Reformists are clergy, as well as intellectuals and activists; rulers and citizens, both traditionalist and modernist. They can be found at Islamic institutes and universities, at academic and religious conferences, and in parliamentary debates. Reformist ideas proliferate in hundreds of books and articles, audios, videos and DVDs, in newspaper editorials, in muftis fatwas, and on the Internet. As in the history of Christianity and the Reformation, change in Islam is not limited to debates in theology and law but also involves struggles in politics and society, and at times violence and terror. Read Karen Armstrong's foreword from *The Future of Islam* [PDF] (Photo by J.D. Sloan) From Publishers Weekly A Georgetown University professor and well-known scholar of Islam, Esposito analyzes the current and future practice of Islam in this short but insightful volume. He surveys a number of topics, including identity issues for Muslims living in the West. Esposito highlights the world views of modern Muslim thinkers, such as Tariq Ramadan (Esposito modestly omits mention of his mentorship of some of these scholars). He tackles head-on the myth of Muslim tolerance of 9/11 by pointing to polls showing that the vast majority of Muslims disapproved of the attack and that 358 Muslim employees at the World Trade Center were among the dead. As a senior scientist for Gallup, Esposito has at his command the results of numerous polls of and about Muslims. In this book, he goes beyond the numbers to showcase what Muslims really stand for and want in today's world. Esposito's enthusiasm for his topic makes his book an easy and enlightening read. For instance, he jokes that his job is the easiest in the world as he has only been asked one question for more than 20 years (Is Islam a violent religion?). Independent scholar and bestselling author Karen Armstrong pens a solid foreword. (Feb.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From Booklist The editor of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World* (6v., 2009) argues that Western fears of Islam are grossly overblown. Islam and Muslims are much more various than those fears imagine, the religion being as sectarian as Christianity, and its believers as multicultural and class-riven as the world's Christians. Relations of religion and politics in Islam are similarly varied, with theocracy failing the faith, in particular, in Iran and thriving to any extent in such authoritarian states with democratic pretensions as Egypt. The most valuable of the book's four heavily referenced chapters smashes the Western canard that Muslim leaders won't condemn terrorism. Scores, nay, hundreds, have, most immediately after 9/11, and do. Moreover, nonviolent and democratic Islamic reformers abound, and Esposito profiles many, major self-contradictions and all. Regrettably, Western media drastically underreport and misreport moderation in Islam and ignore the social conditions really responsible for the problems of Islamic nations and particular Muslim communities. When the truth about the modern Islamic mainstream is known, Esposito suggests, cooperation can replace conflict between the West and Islam. --Ray Olson