

**Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions
About the World's Fastest-Growing Faith**

Robert Spencer

San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002. 214 pages.

Rehashing historical animosities, polemics, and stereotypes, Spencer's work is an admirable contribution to the clash of civilizations underway. Basically a collection of diatribes, invective, and ranting against Islam consolidated by a heavy dose of disinformation, *Islam Unveiled* reflects a discursive piece of work consistent with the Imperium's policies and interests. With a pure secular discourse having proven ineffective in confronting Islam, the same discourse has been repackaged in a religious garb, pouring old wine into an even older bottle in order to fight fire with fire. The subtitle of the book, *Disturbing Questions About the World's Fastest-Growing Faith*, expresses the author's main worries and underscores that similar publications are not mere religio-polemical enterprises to be

responded to by sheer counter-polemics. Rather, they are part and parcel of a strategy of conflict seeking to undermine basic beliefs and identity structures for the purpose of essential mastery and domination – military, political, economic, and, above all, cultural.

The basic polemical frame is whether and to what possible extent Islam can be made compatible with supposedly “superior” western values. Alternatively, instances in which such compatibility is not possible is taken as a standard point indicating Islamic irrelevance and failure. In the book’s 10 chapters, therefore, Spencer raises typical questions and issues that, in line with the purposes of western discourse, beg their own answers. Most chapters are in the form of a question probing, for instance, whether Islam is a religion of peace, promotes sound moral values, respects human rights and women, is compatible with liberal democracy or secularism, and is tolerant of others, particularly non-Muslims.

In addressing these doubting questions, Spencer exhibits a largely selective, manipulative, and parochial approach. For one thing, much of what he holds against Muslims could very easily be countered and leveled against his fellow Christians. Engaging in such an exercise, however, is highly susceptible to being reduced to a shouting match – an exercise in futility. Methodologically speaking, Spencer tends to deal with religious issues secularly rather than religiously. When the latter is mostly concerned with the worldly path to salvation, he fails to show how secularism could lead to the same. This may pose no problem from a western perspective, given that early Christianity incorporated pagan elements, Roman law, and human intervention in revelation, as manifested in the principle of Trinity, man-made positive laws, and the subjection of scripture to pure reason, all the while reducing salvation to believing.

For example, when Spencer cites the harsh law of amputation for a thief, this constitutes something that modern positive law can neither grapple with nor comprehend. Admittedly harsh, yet it must be understood within the religious frame, the alternative to which may be a harsher punishment in the Hereafter. Of course Spencer may argue for mercy and compassion, which is both admirable and understandable, except that in addition to both, religious communities still require religious organizational principles and legal structures consistent with belief systems. The idea of divine law – which does not solely mean that its source is revelatory, but also that this world is linked to the Hereafter by applying it, and by its very structure – seems largely external to Spencer’s frame of reference.

As a result of this, such human constructs and associated fads as liberal democracy, human rights, and feminism, among other constructed values, may constitute preferences that may not necessarily be consistent with the requirements of salvation. In religious jargon, if this is the case, they are all in vain. Thus, in his polemical pseudo-religious engagement, Spencer misses much of the point. And it does not suffice to argue pragmatically that one need only look at western civilization's magnificent achievements to recognize the superiority of its values. In their heydays, most historical civilizations made such arguments before their eventual demise. These are examples of the fundamental issues that Spencer should have addressed in order to avoid superficiality and pragmatic opportunism.

Spencer also revels in the issue of women and their treatment, perhaps under the impression that he has hit upon Islam's weakest point, out of which he could make the most. In the process, he brings up the usual issues of polygamy, divorce, and female circumcision, citing Prophetic traditions selectively picked up from here and there to make his points. He ignores the stipulations of jurisprudence, where one must look at all of the rules pertaining to a particular issue before arriving at a conclusion. It is not enough to engage in a micro-exercise while ignoring macro-considerations. Moreover, defining gender relations is a precondition for organizing family structure and, from thereon, society at large. Alternative western notions of gender equality have produced different forms of organizational principles that reflected social engineering and experimentation and are not necessarily consistent with divine commandments, Christian or otherwise. Granted that human beings are less than perfect; nevertheless, Islamic law has significantly protected the family unit and social cohesion in ways that may still approximate the divine will. On the western front, the results seem to be less than impressive, as procedural equality betrayed serious substantive social and family problems.

Much of what else Spencer endeavors to say in his work could easily be methodologically, interpretively, and informationally refuted and contradicted, were there enough space to allow such a response. However, it is important to note that misplaced Muslims' hypersensitivity to such polemics threatens to channel much of the energy needed to put their own house in order toward defensiveness and apology. They would do well not to fall into such traps.

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