

**Book Review****The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?**

By John L. Esposito. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, ix + 243 pp.

There is little dispute that the Iranian revolution, the ensuing hostage crises in Tehran and Beirut, the Salman Rushdie affair, and, finally, the Persian Gulf war have drastically changed the image of Islam in the West. The rhetoric of the most ardent Muslim activists has been accepted at face value, and Islam has been identified as a revolutionary force with an axe to grind against the West. Although the Western phobia of Islam has some justification, the West has allowed stereotypes and shibboleths to rule its judgment too easily. Explicitly, as well as implicitly, Islam is depicted in the media and even academic literature as the religion of war, vengeance, and destruction—as a force that is inimical to the orderly conduct of international relations and the progress of society and politics. Islam is viewed as hostile to democracy, minority rights, and women's welfare. Islam as a world civilization has been reduced to Islamic fundamentalism, and even then the West has preferred to cling to political slogans rather than grapple with complex sociopolitical processes in understanding the theoretical and political challenge of Islamic movements.

The ramifications of the simultaneous reduction of Islam to fundamentalism and the "mythologization" of fundamentalism are immediately clear. The West turned a blind eye to a brutal military coup in Algeria in 1991, believing that martial rule would be a far better option for Algeria and the West than an Islamic government in Algiers. The reaction to the crisis in the former republics of Yugoslavia has been equally perplexing, especially in the light of Serbia's glorification of its genocidal carnage of Bosnians as "a worthy cause" that Europe will eventually appreciate. After all, the Serbs are "doing Europe a favor by ridding it of the menace of Islam." Muslims have in fact charged, and rightly so, that the West follows a different set of standards on democracy and human rights when it comes to Muslim societies.

Is the Western reaction to things Islamic mere genuflection or does it reveal a more deep-seated anger and distrust of Islam? If the latter is the case, what will the consequences of such a policy be for global interests of the West? *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* offers answers to these queries. Esposito, a leading expert on Islamic studies who has written prolifically on the relation of Islam to politics, provides a lucid examination of the roots of Muslims' activism and the Western response to it. He places the attitude of Islamic movements towards the West in the context of the Muslim experience

with sociopolitical change and Western attitudes towards Islam. In the same vein, he analyzes the Western response to the "Muslim challenge" in the context of the history of relations between Islam and Christianity, beginning with the Crusades. While critical of many of the Islamic movements' views and practices, his most serious questions are posed to his Western audience. The analytical narrative deconstructs the Western view of Islam in a most original fashion, separating fact from fiction, legitimate grievance from cultural bias, and stereotypes and generalizations from the reality of the Muslim world. The author carries the reader through the maze of Western stereotypes about Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, outlining the contours of a cultural discourse that aims to establish a balance of power between the West and Islam.

The analytical narrative is rich in detail. Esposito introduces the reader to a host of Islamic thinkers and movements, governments and parties. In each case, he provides an examination of the origins and development of the Islamic tendency, while all along underscoring the diversity of Islamic activism. Esposito contends that while there are Islamic movements that advocate violence, oppose the West, and follow the revolutionary path, they are by no means representative of the political attitudes of the majority of Muslims. Islam, much like Christianity and Judaism, encompasses far too many perspectives to lend itself to facile generalizations. Iran is as much an example of an Islamic order as is Zia's Pakistan or King Fahd's Saudi Arabia. Similarly, the Takfir wa al Hijrah group is as much a representative of Islamic fundamentalism as are the Afghan Mujahidin, the United States' erstwhile comrades-in-arms.

Even if Muslims do not agree with this assertion, the West tends to parcel these disparate regimes into one monolith. The politics of Islamic movements should rather be contextualized and examined against the background of domestic and international events that have helped to shape them. What is seen in the West as *kulturkampf* in the Muslim world is, in many instances, opposition to Western policies towards Muslim countries. By failing to distinguish between political reaction and cultural conflict, the West has turned Islam into a cultural demon—the antithesis of the West. The parallels with Western attitudes towards communism are only too apparent, and probably as misleading.

In similar vein, the West has identified its enemies in the Muslim world with Islamic fundamentalism in an arbitrary fashion, and again with the result of giving credence to the myth of Islam's imminent threat to the West. Not all those whom the West denounces as Islamic extremists are in fact representatives of the faith or are even accepted as the spokespersons of Islam by Muslims themselves. A case in point is Colonel Qaddafi, whom the United States has vilified as an Islamic fundamentalist, but whom a majority of Muslims view with skepticism. It was President Reagan, not the Muslim masses, who crowned the colonel with the title of "Muslim leader." The same is true of Saddam Hussein, who most Muslims do not acknowledge as a religious

leader even if they were willing to support him in an "anti-imperialist" war. Yet, many in the West have pointed to the Persian Gulf war as an example of Islam's challenge to the West. In reality, the war was proof of the fact that the greater threat to world order was not Islam, but rather a secular dictator who once enjoyed the support of the West.

The stereotypical image of Islam in the West is all the more baffling as, when in its interest, the West has supported Islamic forces and benefited from their friendship: General Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, Gaafar Nimeiri of Sudan, and Gulbadin Hikmatyar of Afghanistan are only the most obvious cases. If there is a breakdown in the West's understanding of the Muslim world, it is not coincidental, but deliberate. Esposito identifies deep-rooted cultural biases, from medieval times to the more recent tradition of orientalism, that shape the Western perspective on Islam. There are also more recent geostrategic interests in identifying Islam as the enemy—the new antithesis of the West to replace communism in popular demonology, keeping the West vigilant in defending its interests.

There are clear dangers in the Western gambit. By failing to see the diversity in the unity of Islam and by insisting on seeing Islam as the enemy, writes Esposito, the West may end up "fulfilling its own prophecies." Fear of imminent Islamic revolution, as seen in Algeria, will lead the West to support unpopular and authoritarian regimes, thereby radicalizing Islamic movements. In the hope of avoiding its worst expectations, the West has and will continue to violate its own dictums, most notably those on democracy and human rights. The more it supports oppressive governments in the Muslim world at the dawn of democracy, openly ignoring the aspirations of the masses, the more Western values will lose face in the Muslim world, thus giving credence to the anti-Western rhetoric of the most extreme of Islamic movements.

Finally, Esposito argues that by identifying all Islamic forces as revolutionary, the West has failed to appreciate the depth and breadth of Islamic activism. Islamic movements are not only radical political forces, but are also social actors. Muslim activists do not only challenge governments, but build hospitals, schools, factories, and housing projects. They fill the lacuna left behind by the collapse of modernizing regimes. Islamic movements are not marginal to the political process in the Muslim world, but are a constituent part of the mainstream. In failing to appreciate this, the West is at a serious loss in making sense of the Muslim world. It will find itself defending unpopular and practically defunct regimes that do not have the support of their people and condemning organizations and parties that often provide the only recourse available to the masses. It should come as no surprise that the masses will resent Western policy, thus "fulfilling the West's prophecy."

This is a well-researched, readable, and provocative book about an important issue. It is also a brave book. It challenges the established view of Islam in the West, questions widely shared axioms, and demands objectivity and

fairness in scholarship and journalism. The hope of fostering greater understanding between Islam and the West, the two most important religious-cultural communities on the planet, dominates the narrative. It is the author's serious scholarship, however, that will compel reexamination of established values and worldviews and thus give that hope a chance. This book is recommended not only to those who study the role of Islam in politics, but also to those who are concerned with cultural discourse and foreign policy making. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* will no doubt be at the heart of all future debates about the role of Islam in politics and its relations with the West.

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