

*The Oxford History of Islam*, edited by John L. Esposito

reviewed by [Harold Vogelaar](#) in the [August 16, 2000](#) issue

If you're looking for a scholarly one-volume history of Islam that is comprehensive, richly illustrated and designed to be readable, this is one of the best. The writers--men and women, Christian and Muslim--are among the finest scholars in their fields and display an enviable ability to select out of a vast ocean of material those events, people and ideas that make a particular topic lucid and understandable, especially for readers new to the field. The lack of footnotes is designed to make the book more appealing to general readers, but students and scholars drawn to it by the quality and depth of its content will miss them. A select bibliography for each chapter is intended to provide resource material.

The volume's 15 chapters cover a wide range of topics, among them "Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge," "Science, Medicine, and Technology," "Islam and Christendom," "Sultanates and Gunpowder Empires" and "The Globalization of Islam." Each chapter provides novel and fresh approaches that help the reader understand familiar yet complex subjects. Though many geographic areas are covered, including Central Asia and China, the material on Islam in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, is slim. A chronology of important events and a detailed index are useful additions.

I found the chapter on "Law and Society," by Mohammad Hashim Kamali, especially instructive. In tracing the early origins and later development of the Shari'a, Kamali makes clear how carefully Muslims adapted their legal principles to establish an equitable balance between justice and faith, compliance with the letter of the law and the law's intent. Contrary to popular Western belief, the author argues, Islamic law actually has a propensity for individual rights, at least in theory, and some schools of law moved far in this direction.

Kamali also makes a strong case for Islam's incorporation of gradualism and pragmatism in its approach to social change--a factor not always understood or appreciated by non-Muslims, who tend to see Islam as impulsive and inflexible. What does come through loud and clear is that for the Muslim community religious law is incredibly important, both as a reality and as a symbol of God's purpose for humanity. What's more, Muslims remain convinced that they must find an equitable

way of relating it to the ills of modern society.

Because John Esposito has done so masterful a job of presenting a history of Islam that moves with integrity from its humble origins to its current worldwide significance, I heartily recommend this book.