

Epic of Islam

by [Harold Vogelaar](#) in the [May 9, 2001](#) issue

*Islam: Empire of Faith*, directed by Rob Gardner (PBS)

Proverbially there are three sides to a story--my side, your side and what really happened. In the long and sometimes sordid history of Christian-Muslim relations, the West has historically played to the hilt its side of the story, seldom listened to the other side, and has rarely been objective in its search for what really happened.

Understandable as this may have been, given the at times high stakes of military conquest and defense, it has left a bitter residue of mistrust and suspicion that continues to bedevil relationships today. Many Americans, for example, still accept journalistic twists that equate Islam with terror and Muslims with fanaticism. They appear to accept anything sordid attributed to Islam and Muslims as being, ipso facto, true. Today's voices of militant Muslim extremists, the American media and Christian extremists who preach that the Antichrist will be a Muslim only feed into this lingering strain of confrontation and demonization.

Effectively countering such misapprehensions is Rob Gardner's extraordinary three-hour production *Islam: Empire of Faith*, airing on PBS. It depicts scenes from the first thousand years of Islamic history. Beginning with historical reenactments of Muhammad's life and mission in Mecca and Medina, it follows Muslim armies in their marches of conquest and expansion, accents the glory and fame of vast empires built by Muslims, and concludes with the life and death of the Ottoman Empire's most celebrated and feared ruler, Suliman the Magnificent.

All in all the authentic historical re-creations, at times of epic proportions and narrated by such renowned scholars as Jonathan Bloom, Sheila Blair, Norma Jean Calderwood and John Renard, to name but a few, leave the viewer awed and amazed and make patently clear that the civilization Muslims lament losing was indeed glorious, multifaceted and richly textured. In scenes eloquently and artistically re-created one will find something of interest in nearly every discipline--law, science, medicine, education, art and architecture, politics, the military--and be amazed at the remarkable contributions Muslims have made to each.

For example, the viewer comes to know that the Islamic empire probably started the first hospitals as we know them today. These hospitals separated patients according to their reason for admission, since it had been determined that infectious diseases were less likely to be transmitted this way. Viewers are also reminded of facts learned in elementary schools about "Arabic numerals"--that they were developed hundreds of years ago through the scholarship of Muslims, at the "House of Wisdom" in Baghdad. One also is reminded that Muslims in Spain developed a brilliant and tolerant society in which Jews and Christians played important roles.

More important, Christians will become aware that Muslims intend to worship no other god than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, though they include Ishmael in this list; that Jesus is revered and honored as a great prophet; that Muhammad initially sought an alliance with Jews and Christians in his struggle against immorality and false worship; and that the call to prayer five times each day is a ringing affirmation that "there is no god but God" who is the Merciful Lord of Mercy.

The film does not tell the whole story. There is much that is left out or toned down. For example, when comparing the production of manuscripts in Baghdad to those of the West, it refers to a monastery in France which, we are told, was fortunate to have ten manuscripts, whereas Baghdad had thousands. Left out of the story are Rome and Constantinople. And the narrator uses the word "recruitment" to describe how the Ottomans captured Christian children and made them into Janissaries. The film is superb in accenting all that is savory. Perhaps its producers believe that reporting what is unsavory has already had its day.

Regardless, Gardner's production is a giant step in the right direction, one that can move both sides to be far more objective in discussing what really happened and in candidly telling the rest of the story.