

# Reading Islam: An extended teachable moment

by [Charles Kimball](#) in the [May 17, 2005](#) issue

Prior to September 11, 2001, a substantial majority in the United States approached Islam with a strange kind of detailed ignorance. For many Americans the words *Islam* and *Muslims* evoked disjointed images of violence, religious fanaticism, rejection of the modern world, mistreated women, and praying men bowing in the direction of Mecca. Popular Western perceptions based largely on news reports and television images of war, revolution, hijackings, hostage-takings and mysterious societies seemingly closed to the outside world have been nurtured in the context of a long history of bias and misinformation.

Interest in Islam shifted to a completely different level after September 11. Three and a half years later we continue to be in an extended teachable moment. As anyone with expertise in Islam can readily attest, the demand for media interviews, university lectures and speeches in churches and at conferences remains very high. Publishers have responded to the demand with an array of books aimed at nonspecialists who want to know more about Islam in historical and contemporary perspective.

The stakes are very high in an interconnected and interdependent world where there are many weapons of mass destruction and where small numbers of zealots can wreak havoc. Ignorance is dangerous. How do we make sense of what is going on and anticipate what may come next? Which resources are most helpful and why? A wise friend once noted, "When you are standing on the edge of a cliff, progress is not defined as one step forward." For many, moving back from the brink requires a better understanding of the basics of Islam.

**General introductions:** A general introduction to Islam is a logical place to start. The best of these books cover similar terrain. They survey the emergence of Islam in the seventh century; provide an overview of the life and teachings of Muhammad and of major themes in the Qur'an; clarify Muslims' understanding that theirs is the

same religion God revealed through Abraham, Moses and Jesus; and explore the development, debates and practices of various Muslim groups as the religious system and broader civilization spread rapidly. The most useful introductions highlight the major doctrinal and legal frameworks that have guided Muslims for centuries, and they broadly frame contemporary developments in the context of the past two or three centuries.

*Islam: Faith and History*, by Mahmoud M. Ayoub (Oneworld), is an excellent and very accessible introduction. Ayoub, a Muslim born in southern Lebanon, is a professor of Islamic studies and comparative religion at Temple University. He has long been an articulate voice explaining Islam in the U.S. and throughout the Middle East. His years of teaching in the classroom and making presentations to non-Muslim groups clearly inform the structure and content of his book.

Two widely acclaimed introductions have been revised recently. Frederick Denny's *An Introduction to Islam* (3rd rev. ed., Prentice Hall) is the most helpful book in this genre, and it now has a chapter that explores key issues in the post-September 11 world. Denny provides solid background information, substantial depth, footnotes and annotated suggestions for further reading. The paperback volume works well as the primary text for survey courses on Islam.

John Esposito's *Islam: The Straight Path* (3rd ed., Oxford University Press) is a more affordable and very reliable guide that I have used successfully in many classes. It is a succinct, up-to-date survey of Islamic experience, an introduction to the beliefs and practices of Islam from its origins to contemporary resurgence movements. Following September 11 Esposito published a basic primer, *What Everybody Needs to Know About Islam* (Oxford University Press) and a text directly addressing the most pressing issues related to militant Islamist movements, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford University Press). In these books Esposito, professor of Islamic studies and head of the Center for the Study of Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations at Georgetown University, a prolific writer and one of the most articulate students of Islam, proffers clear and concise answers to many of the questions most non-Muslims ask.

Esposito also served as general editor for the recently published reference work *The Islamic World: Past and Present* (Oxford University Press). Its three volumes include more than 300 articles on key individuals (from Abraham, al-Ghazali and Rumi to Malcolm X, Salman Rushdie and Osama bin Laden), empires (such as those of the

Mughals and Ottomans), contemporary countries (Algeria, Indonesia, Syria and so on), important doctrines (including those related to abortion, the afterlife, fasting and suicide), and groups and movements often in the headlines (such as Hamas, al-Qaeda and the Nation of Islam). These volumes are geared toward nonspecialists and include glossaries, maps, color plates and timelines. Most individuals will need to depend on a library for this resource, however, given the price of \$325.

Vartan Gregorian's short book *Islam: A Mosaic, Not a Monolith* (Brookings Institution Press) is a less known but exceptionally well-written introduction. Gregorian, president of the Carnegie corporation and former president of Brown University, was born into an Armenian family in Iran and grew up in Iran and Lebanon before coming to the U.S. for higher education. His book provides a thoughtful historical overview, then focuses on the developments within Islam during the past two centuries that help explain contemporary events. It is a particularly valuable resource for both individual and group study.

Those interested in the historical and theological interplay between Jews, Christians and Muslims should examine F. E. Peters's completely revised edition of his classic book *The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (Princeton University Press). Peters, an erudite scholar of Middle Eastern history and religion at New York University, explores the ways adherents think, how they talk about and worship God, how they organize hierarchies, the ways they approach community, scripture and tradition, and how they develop legal systems. Understanding and appreciation of the shared beliefs and values of those whom Muslims call the People of the Book is increasingly important in the post-September 11 world. Clergy, students of comparative religion and interested general readers will benefit from Peters's clarifying and provocative insights.

**The Qur'an:** Many who want to understand Islam turn instinctively to the Qur'an to read the scriptures for themselves. They ask what the Qur'an says about Christians and Jews, the Day of Judgment, the status of women, martyrdom, the meaning of *jihad* and so forth. People planning to read the Qur'an face two questions: Which English version of the text is preferable? And how can someone who did not grow up studying and learning about the Qur'an navigate the often unfamiliar terrain?

Muslims have always maintained that the Qur'an cannot be translated—that because it must be read and recited in Arabic, any English version is already an interpretation. This is reflected in the titles of some popular and widely used texts:

*The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (Amana), by M. M. Pickthall; *The Koran Interpreted* (Touchstone), by A. J. Arberry; *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Amana), by Abdullah Yusuf Ali; and the more recent *Al Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation* (Princeton University Press), by Ahmed Ali. The latter two translations include the Arabic and English text side by side as well as detailed notes. Pickthall's translation, which also contains useful notes on each page, has long been a standard, but many readers find it stiff and awkward at points. Arberry's translation is by far the most poetic, capturing something of the lyrical quality of the Arabic. However, the uninitiated are likely to find it more difficult to understand than the more literal translations.

The Qur'an is less accessible than the biblical books of Genesis and Exodus or the Pauline epistles. Divided into 114 *surahs*, or chapters, it is a little shorter than the New Testament and is not arranged in chronological order. Many of the passages sound familiar to people who read the Bible, but the narrative often doesn't flow as expected. Passages on Abraham and Moses, for instance, frequently assume that the hearer knows the background or context. For these reasons, readers wishing to engage with the Qur'an are well advised both to acquire a translation with notes and to have a companion text nearby.

Two of the most valuable newer introductory guides are Michael Sells's *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (White Cloud Press) and Farid Esack's *The Qur'an: A User's Guide* (Oneworld). Sells's book received national attention and became the focus of controversy in 2002 when it was a summer reading selection for incoming students at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. The content and value of the book were obscured amid the posturing and hyperbolic assertions of the many conservative politicians, clergy and outraged talk show hosts who criticized university officials. *Approaching the Qur'an* is a distinctive book, providing fresh translations, an audio CD for the earliest surahs and much more. Through careful scholarship and illuminating commentary, Sells opens up the rich and multiple ways the Qur'an conveys meaning to those who read it and hear it recited.

Esack takes a broader, more traditional approach as he identifies and explicates the Qur'an's key themes and the history and traditions of interpreting the sacred text. He discusses language, style and arrangement of the Qur'an, as well as differences between the early (Meccan) and later (Medinan) revelations and the importance of the "occasions of revelation" for understanding particular passages. Both the Esack volume and the Sells book are valuable guides for non-Muslims who wish to read and

study the Qur'an.

**Islam in political context:** New books on contemporary and possible future religious and political developments within Islam abound. A visit to Barnes and Noble to investigate options can be overwhelming. One good way to understand elements of the larger picture is to explore a particular setting.

Iran, which has been at the center of regional and global attention for over three decades, will continue to be a focal point for the foreseeable future. Azar Nafisi's best-selling memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (Random House) offers poignant and revealing images of this multifaceted country. Her compelling account of teaching Western literature in revolutionary Iran provides insights into the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the lives of courageous Iranian women and much more. *Reading Lolita* undermines simplistic portraits of Islam as monolithic. Nafisi challenges stereotypes on many levels and puts human faces on Muslims in Iran.

Stephen Kinzer's *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (John Wiley & Sons) is a sobering study that reads like a page-turning spy novel. Kinzer, a veteran *New York Times* correspondent with extensive experience in Central America and the Middle East, regards contemporary issues as a direct outgrowth of many decades of British and U.S. intervention and manipulation within the convoluted political and religious history of Iran. The struggle for participatory government in a predominantly Shi'ite land didn't begin with the 1979 revolution. Understanding the shifting internal and external forces shaping events requires geopolitical awareness of Iran's place as a country with vast oil reserves situated along the soft underbelly of the former Soviet Union. In short, several U.S. "vital interests" converged in Iran throughout the 20th century.

Kinzer's book should be required reading for every legislator on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations or on the House Committee on International Relations—and for President Bush, the secretaries of state and defense and others shaping U.S. foreign policy toward predominantly Muslim countries. Policy makers should also read Rashid Khalidi's *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East* (Beacon). Although his focus is not Islam, investigating Western intervention in the modern Middle East is essential if one hopes to understand the sources of Islamists' anger and frustration. Khalidi is also critical of various Arab and Muslim countries where human rights abuses, economic exploitation and a lack of political participation help create a context that fuels

violence and extremism. A professor of Arab studies and director of the Middle East Institute at Columbia University, Khalidi is a frequent radio and television analyst. His ability to communicate to nonspecialists comes through nicely in this short book.

Kinzer and Khalidi provide a much-needed corrective to the analysis of Bernard Lewis, Princeton's emeritus professor of Middle East studies. In his best-selling *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (HarperCollins), Lewis addresses contemporary anti-Western attitudes and the dysfunctional state of many Muslim lands today. He argues that the decline of Islamic civilization over the past 600 years resulted from defeats at the hands of the West—in trade, technology, science, philosophy, political development, modernization, diplomacy and war. The debilitating impact of pervasively exploitative Western colonial rule and superpower domination over the past two centuries is strangely missing from his analysis. It is not hard to see why Lewis is a favorite “expert analyst” for the current U.S. administration.

Gilles Kepel, professor and chair of Middle East studies at the Institute of Political Studies in Paris, assesses the contemporary landscape differently. He examines the impact of global terrorism and U.S.-led military responses in his provocative critique *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Harvard University Press). Exposing the striking convergences between as well as the divergent goals of “jihadist” Muslims and neoconservatives in the U.S., he emphasizes that a more healthy and hopeful future requires forms of democratic, participatory government in places where authoritarianism and corruption now prevail.

**Contemporary Islamic reform:** Both Khalidi and Kepel are sharply critical of what they believe are counterproductive approaches currently being employed by the U.S. Kepel argues that the most important battle in the war for Muslim minds will be fought not in Iraq or Israel/Palestine, but in the suburbs of Paris, London and other Western cities where Islam is now a fixture. Two prominent Muslims—Feisal Abdul Rauf and Tariq Ramadan—develop this theme in new books that have attracted considerable attention.

Rauf, the imam of Masjid al-Farah in New York City, is an increasingly visible Muslim leader in the U.S. He appeared frequently in the national media in the months following September 11, and more recently he has been on programs exploring the impact and legacy of the interfaith initiatives of Pope John Paul II. Born in Kuwait and educated in England, Malaysia, Egypt and the U.S., Rauf has a very deep knowledge

of the Islamic world and the West. In contrast to Lewis, who contends that the crisis is in Islam, Rauf locates the problem in the relationship between the Muslim world and the West. In *What's Right with Islam: A New Vision for Muslims and the West* (HarperCollins), he argues that the Qur'an and Islamic principles support the values of pluralism and free society. He develops a hopeful new vision for Muslims that is based on affirmations of what is right with Islam and with the U.S.

Tariq Ramadan's *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford University Press) charts another approach to reform within Islam. Ramadan, professor of philosophy at the College of Geneva and professor of Islamic studies at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, provides guidance for growing Muslim communities that seek ways to harmonize their faith with a Western context. Appealing to Islamic sources, Ramadan argues that Western Muslims must fashion an independent Western Islam, anchoring themselves in the cultural context of Europe, the U.S. and Canada, not in the traditions of predominantly Muslim countries. He identifies the resources for this bold vision in universal Islamic principles, demonstrating that Islam need not be in opposition to the West in the spheres of economics, education and social values.

Finally, a new collection of 14 essays, *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Oneworld), illuminates the breadth of the honest intellectual engagement with which many Muslim scholars today address critical and controversial issues. Edited by Omid Safi, assistant professor of philosophy and religion at Colgate University, the collection—like the books by Rauf and Ramadan—demonstrates the capacity for change, renewal and growth in the world's second largest religion. These texts also demonstrate how the popular media too often gravitate toward the most sensational and simplistic images of Islam, failing to register and explore the self-critical and nuanced voices that are increasingly audible among Muslims.