

Unveiling Islam

Why does Osama bin Laden invoke the Koran? Georgetown's John Esposito, a star among scholars of the Muslim world, will tell you.

John Esposito is pacing around a Georgetown University classroom, where he is teaching a freshman seminar on Islam and the West. "If there was a resurgence in religion, where would you expect it to be strongest—in the most or least modernized countries?" he asks the 16 students sitting around a U-shaped table. Modernization theory, he tells them, says to look to the least-modernized countries. Yet the opposite happened in the Middle East. Iran and other countries rocked by religious resurgence and political explosions in the 1970s and 1980s were the most modern, he says.

As he speaks, Esposito, one of the nation's leading experts on Islam and founding director of Georgetown's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, gesticulates like a concert maestro trying to get more energy out of the violin section. His enthusiasm for the subject is obvious, fueled by his zeal to be, as he puts it, a "bridge builder between the Muslim world and the West."

Esposito has been talking about the nexus between Islam and politics for three decades, long before most experts recognized its importance. In the 1970s, he began to visit Islamic nations and meet with young religious leaders.

"At a time when Middle East studies was focusing on Arab nationalism, he was focusing on Islamic fundamentalism," says Vali Nasr, an expert in Middle East and South Asia politics at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. "John took Muslim belief and laws seriously. He understood the phenomenon that was sweeping across the Muslim world."

After 9/11, Esposito won attention—and stirred controversy—for his defense of Islam. He said Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda followers are only an extremist minority. Islam, he ar-

Alvin P. Sanoff profiled writer David Brooks in May.



gued as the United States prepared for war against Iraq, is not the enemy.

Esposito's understanding of Islam has roots in his own religious journey. The son of a machinist, he grew up in a working-class Italian neighborhood in Brooklyn and entered a Capuchin Franciscan monastery at age 14. He spent ten years preparing for the priesthood only to have a change of heart. "Although the order emphasized community, I never felt like I had a family or a community there," he explains. "Deep down I felt a certain loneliness."

After he left the seminary, Esposito tried his hand at the corporate world and at teaching high school. But religion continued to intrigue him. He enrolled in a doctoral program in religious studies at Temple University in Philadelphia, where the chair of the religion department, a Jewish American, suggested that he

Terrorists have hijacked Islam, says Esposito, who created Georgetown's Muslim-Christian center.

take a course on Islam to round out his understanding of the world's religions. Esposito resisted. He had a negative view of Muslims that came from popular culture, where Arabs were generally portrayed as villainous despots. But the department chairman insisted, and he agreed to take one course.

The charismatic professor teaching the class was a Palestinian refugee and scholar of Islam. Esposito was surprised to learn that Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, was an Abrahamic faith that believes in one God. "If Muslims recognized many of the major prophets of Judaism and Christianity—including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus—why had I not been aware of this after all my years of liberal arts and theological training?" he wondered.

At Temple, he was surrounded by students from the Islamic world, including those from Nigeria, Egypt, Pakistan, and Malaysia. He discovered that most Muslims—more than 75 percent today—live outside Arab countries. Many are in South Asia and Africa, and a growing number live in Western democracies.

Though Islam fascinated Esposito, it did not fascinate the academy, as he learned when he went job hunting after earning his doctorate. He found no market for an Islamic scholar and took a post at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, primarily teaching courses on world religion. There he settled into what looked to be a quiet academic career; his expertise was rarely needed, his phone almost never rang.

Then in 1979, the Iranian revolution broke out, and Islam was on the front page. Newspapers and television sought him for interviews. Publishers who had once rejected his book proposals wanted to know how quickly he could produce a manuscript. He went into overdrive and has never stopped.

Esposito has written or coauthored about 40 books and reference works, most published by Oxford University Press. As demand for his books grew, Oxford offered a six-figure advance to keep him from signing with a bigger publisher. Graham Fuller, an expert on Islam who once was vice chair of the National Intelligence Council at the CIA, calls Esposito's writing "the most important on a broad popular basis of anybody in the field. He has been working to explain, clarify, and educate the West on the nature of Islamic religion and cultures in all their variety."

Fuller believes that Esposito's religious background has given him a level of insight into the relationship between religion and society that many scholars lack. "He is searching for common ground between two great religions," Fuller says.

By the early 1990s, Esposito's standing in the scholarly world was well established. He was comfortable at Holy Cross. His wife, Jean, whom he met and married a year after leaving the seminary, was moving up the ladder as an executive with a medical-supply company. While in Washington promoting a book, he called home and found a message from George-

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town's provost. The two met that afternoon and talked about establishing a Georgetown center on Muslim-Christian relations. Esposito was excited by the prospect. He had previously turned down an endowed chair at the College of William & Mary because it would have conflicted with his wife's career. But Georgetown's offer came when she was closer to retirement.

In 1993 Esposito moved here to direct the new center. Initially, he commuted so his wife, whom he describes as an invaluable critic of his writing, could continue with her career. On days when they were apart, the couple would talk on the phone and continue their evening ritual of sharing martinis.

When his wife retired and moved here, they bought a home in the Hillandale community near the university. Last year, they sold their home to National Football League commissioner Paul Tagliabue and moved to a condominium in Bethesda. They also own a weekend getaway on the Eastern Shore and have built their "dream home" on the western coast of Florida.

Scholars elsewhere say Esposito's efforts to reach out to the world beyond academia have made Georgetown's center distinctive. The center has hosted conferences that have brought scholars, political leaders, and journalists from Muslim nations together with their counterparts in the West. Five full-time faculty members are associated with the center, which has affiliations with several institutions of higher education in the Muslim world.

After 9/11, Esposito stepped up his efforts to bridge the gap in understanding among Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Within five months of the attack, he produced two books, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* and *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*, done in a question-and-answer format to make it accessible to a wide audience. He credits his wife with suggesting the approach. This December, National Geographic Society published *Geography of Religion: Where God Lives, Where Pilgrims Walk*, a book that he coauthored.

Unlike many scholars, who see the world through the lens of a single academic discipline, Esposito examines

Islam 101

We asked John Esposito to suggest books that offer a good introduction to Islam.

What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam by John L. Esposito (Oxford University Press). A brief introduction to Islam in a question-and-answer format that focuses on issues raised after 9/11 about Islam's faith, practice, and politics. It covers everything from beliefs and rituals to issues like gender, violence, jihad, pluralism, and tolerance.

The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Harper San Francisco). A Muslim scholar reflects on the essence of Islam, presents its core spiritual and social values, and relates them to their counterparts in the Jewish and Christian traditions.

The Children of Abraham by F.E. Peters (Princeton University Press). An excellent introduction to three great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), their shared heritage, and important differences.

Western Muslims and the Future of Islam by Tariq Ramadan (Oxford University Press). One of Europe's leading Muslim thinkers and activists, whose visa to teach at the University of Notre Dame was revoked by the US government on security grounds, addresses questions of Islamic reform and what it means to be a Western Muslim seeking to live in harmony with one's faith and country.

A Brief History of Islam by Tamara Sonn (Blackwell Publishers). An introduction to essential Islamic beliefs and practices that summarizes major historical developments, describes their impact on the formulation of Islamic ideology and institutions, and offers distinctions between jihad and terrorism.

Islam by looking at history, religion, and culture. He argues that Islam should be considered as part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Muslims, like Christians and Jews, believe in one God. Their scripture, the Koran, contains many references to stories and figures in the Bible.

“We should be talking in terms of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition,” he says.

According to Esposito, many scholars—including Princeton historian Bernard Lewis—fail to fully appreciate this and ignore the diversity of Islam as it flourishes outside the Arab world. Years ago Lewis, whose work helped persuade the Bush administration that Iraq could be democratized by toppling Saddam Hussein, developed the idea that Islam and the West are engaged in a centuries-old battle of cultures that are fundamentally at odds.

Esposito argues that this view of a “clash of civilizations”—a phrase Lewis coined but that Harvard’s Samuel Huntington later made popular—is simplistic. Lewis, he says, “tends to equate the experiences of the Arab world with the entire Muslim experience.”

Arab hostility toward the West, Esposito contends, is a legacy of colonialism more than an expression of cultures in conflict. The colonial powers helped set the bound-

aries of the Arab world and prop up regimes that siphoned off oil profits intended for the people. As a result, some Muslims rejected Western-style democracy and turned to Islam. Muslim radicals overthrew the Shah of Iran in 1979, assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, and formed terrorist groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Critics say Esposito is soft on Muslim radicals. Islamic fundamentalism “is one of the dangerous radical movements of our time,” says one.

Esposito says that while Islamic fundamentalism has fueled violence, it can also fuel healthy political activism. Nothing in Islam is incompatible with democracy, he says. “Many Muslims can find within Islamic tradition support for political participation, civil society, and human rights.”

While anti-West terrorists have found jus-

tification and motivation in the Koran, Esposito argues that they have taken scripture out of context and “hijacked the religion.” Esposito argues that like abortion-clinic bombers, Muslim terrorists are extremists, a tiny minority abhorred by the majority in their faith. All religions have “both transcendent and dark sides,” he says.

Because the memories of colonialism are still fresh, Esposito says, the Iraq war has fueled anti-Americanism in the Arab world and made rooting out terrorism more difficult. Whatever the outcome in Iraq, he adds, the United States for now has no choice but to work with entrenched, sometimes authoritarian governments in the region. He believes that over time it must use diplomacy and foreign aid to pressure governments to democratize.

Ultimately, he says, the United States and the international community cannot impose change on the Arab world. “Change has to come from within these countries.”

Esposito is not optimistic that Yasser Arafat’s death will lead to a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He doubts that Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon has the vision and will to make a deal or that Arafat’s successors will have enough



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support from militants. He is skeptical that the Bush administration will force the two sides together.

Conservatives regard Esposito as soft on Muslim fundamentalists. “He sees radical Islam as a potential source for good in the spread of democracy, while I view it as one of the dangerous radical movements of our time,” says Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, a Philadelphia-based think tank. Pipes likens his differences with Esposito to the Cold War split between those who favored confrontation with the Soviet Union and those who supported an accommodationist stance.

After 9/11, Stanley Kurtz, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, wrote in the *National Review* that Esposito, while serving as a foreign-affairs consultant for the Clinton administration, passed along “bad advice [that] may have had a great deal to do with the State Department’s foolish refusal even to look at critical intelligence on Osama bin Laden’s activities.”

Esposito dismisses the idea that he played an insider role, saying, “Critics assume I was wired in at the top, but I met Clinton for the first time after he left office,” and

then only to help put together a conference in New York.

Esposito says that critics such as Pipes and Kurtz tend to see the world as a struggle between two contending forces—first it was communism and now it is radical Islam. They fail to distinguish between mainstream Islam and violent extremists and terrorists, he argues. “Pipes deliberately ignores the fact that most Muslims live and function within society, not underground.”

Esposito, who is one of only four Georgetown faculty members who hold the position of University Professor, recently stepped down as director of the Muslim-Christian center so he could shed administrative duties and spend more time with his wife.

“I wanted to get a life,” the 64-year-old scholar says. But he seems incapable of slowing down. He thinks nothing of taking a five-day trip to London and Singapore, returning to Washington for a few days to teach a class, and then heading off to Turkey for two conferences in four days.

To remain fit and help maintain his endurance for trips abroad, Esposito runs at least four times a week for as much as eight

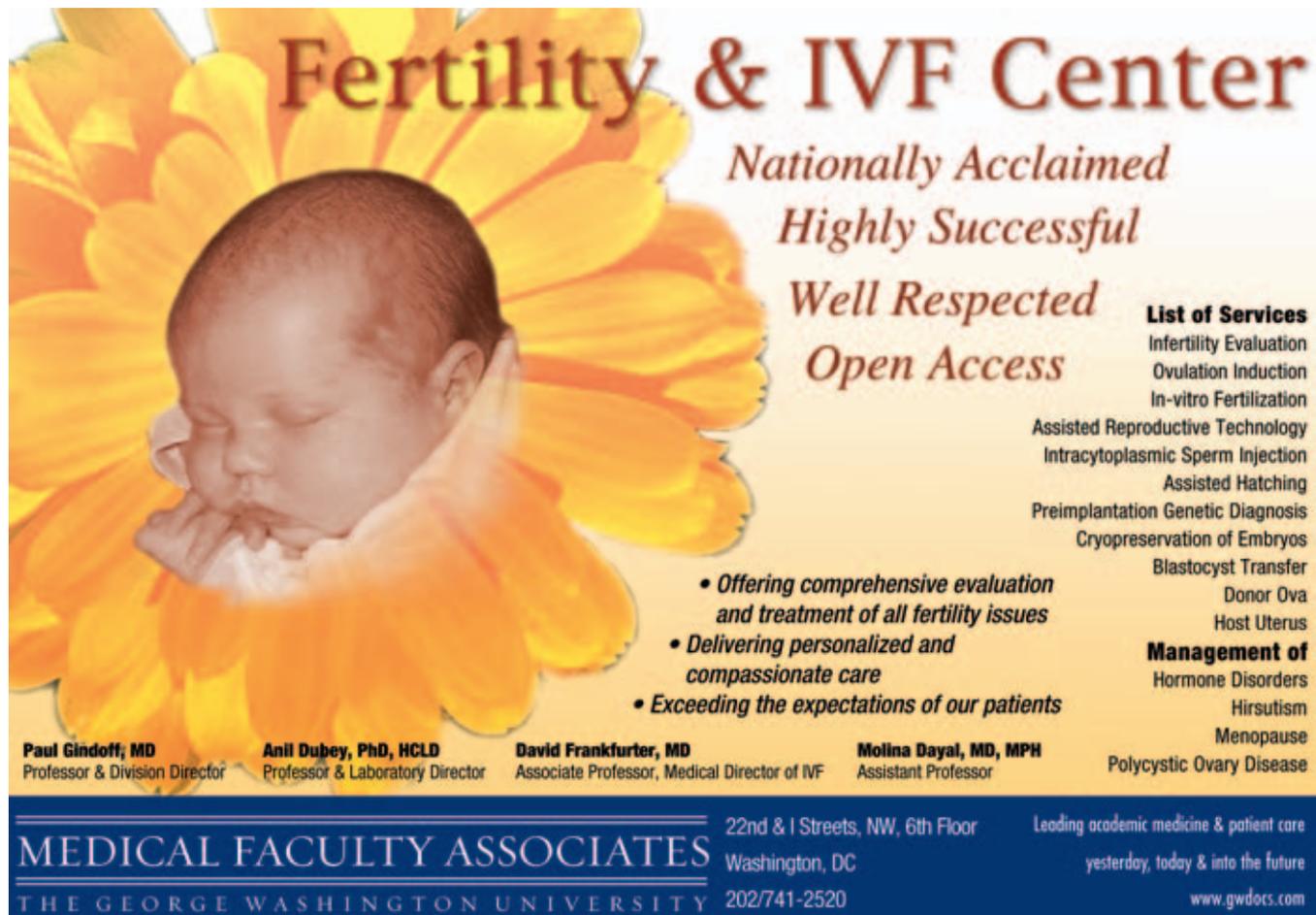
miles. On the mornings he runs, he gets up at 5 and is at his desk by 7.

He frequently meets and consults with government officials from the State Department, FBI, Department of Homeland Security, and Justice Department. In the 2003–04 academic year, he gave more than 50 speeches to audiences as diverse as the Jesuit School of Theology in Croatia, the Booz Allen consulting firm, and Northern Kentucky University. Although he often talks pro bono, his speaking fees can exceed \$30,000.

A few years ago in India, he spoke to 250,000 Muslims at a conference center that had been created out of a rice field. It wasn’t exactly Woodstock, but Esposito says the size of the audience made him feel “like I was Mick Jagger.”

“I get off on it, if I can make something come alive for an audience,” he says.

Esposito is astonished at the role in which life has cast him. When he was growing up in Brooklyn, his aspirations were modest. He never dreamed that he would write books and advise government officials, let alone travel the globe to explain Islam to the West, and the West to Islam. It’s a far cry from the days when he was an all-but-invisible scholar scrambling to find a job. **W**



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