

## FOREWORD

This is an important book. Those of us who have been on the front line of the effort, since the atrocities of September 11, 2001, to explain Islam in the Western world soon became aware not simply of the widespread ignorance of Muslim religion in both Europe and the United States but also of an entrenched reluctance to see Islam in a more favorable light. People often look balked and vaguely mutinous when, for example, you explain that the Qur'an does not in fact advocate the indiscriminate slaughter of the infidel or the propagation of the faith by the sword, and that even though there is still much to be done to promote gender equality in Muslim countries, the message of the Qur'an was initially friendly to the emancipation of women.

One of the most frequently asked questions is: "Why has Islam not had a reformation?" The query betrays an ignorance of both Islamic and Western history. It assumes that there was something special and unique about the reform movement initiated by Martin Luther (1483–1556) and John Calvin (1509–64) that points to the inherent superiority and progressive nature of our Western culture. In fact, Luther's was a typical premodern reformation, similar to many of the movements of *islah* ("reform") and *tajdid* ("renewal") that have regularly punctuated Muslim history. They all, Muslim or Christian, follow a similar agenda: they attempt to return to the wellsprings of tradition and cast aside the piety of the immediate past. Thus Luther and Calvin sought to return to the "pure" Christianity of the Bible and the Fathers of the Church, in exactly the same way as Ahmed ibn Taymiyyah of Damascus (1263–1328) advocated a return to the Qur'an and the *sunna* ("customal practice") of the Prophet Muhammad. In his desire to get back to basics, Ibn Taymiyyah also overturned much revered medieval jurisprudence and philosophy, just as Luther and Calvin attacked the medieval scholastic

theologians; like any Muslim reformation, therefore, their movement was both reactionary and revolutionary.

Reform movements usually occur during a period of cultural change or in the wake of a great political disaster, when the old answers no longer suffice and reformers seek to bring the tradition up to date so that it can meet the contemporary challenge. The Protestant Reformation took place during the profound societal changes of the early modern period, when people found that they could no longer practice their faith in the same way as their medieval ancestors. It was, therefore, the product rather than a cause of modernization, and instead of being regarded as the instigator of change, Luther should rather be seen as the spokesman of a current trend. A similar process is now under way in the Muslim world, where the modernization process has been even more problematic than that of sixteenth-century Europe, because it has been complicated by the colonial disruption and continued Western influence in the internal affairs of the former colonies.

Again, Western people are often skeptical about the ability of Islam to reform itself and doubt the presence and effectiveness of Muslim reformers, in part because these creative thinkers get little coverage in the Western press. Thanks to this much-needed book, there is no longer any excuse for such ignorance. Professor Esposito has given a clear and informative introduction to the work of such reformers as Tariq Ramadan, Amr Khalid, Shaykh Ali Goma'a, Mustafa Ceric, Tim Winter, and Heba Raouf. Like Luther, these individuals articulate an important trend in Muslim thinking that challenges the common Western view of Islam. This trend clearly does not regard a literal interpretation of scripture as normative; it is well aware that laws and customs have been conditioned by the historical circumstances in which they developed and must be interpreted in the light of this understanding; it regards self-criticism as creative, necessary, and a religious imperative; it abhors terrorism and violence; and it is anxious to initiate a "gender *jihad*."

Most important, Professor Esposito makes it clear that Western people simply cannot afford to remain uninformed about these developments in the Muslim world. He shows how the failure of Western foreign policy has been one of the causes of the current malaise in the region and that, for example, ignorance about the Sunni/Shia rift in Iraq made it impossible for the United States to identify friends and foes. We now live in one world and share a common predicament. What happens in Gaza or Afghanistan today is likely to have repercussions tomorrow in London or Washington, D.C. To persist in the belief that all Muslims support terrorism, oppose democracy, and are atavistically opposed to freedom is not only counterproductive to Western interests but, as we see in these pages, flies in the face of the

evidence, such as that provided in the recent Gallup Poll. Westerners cannot expect Muslims to adopt a more positive view of their cultural values if they themselves persist in cultivating a stereotypical view of Islam that in some significant respects dates back to the Middle Ages. Unless we can learn to live together in a more just and rational way, we are unlikely to have a viable world to hand on to the next generation.

One comes away from this book convinced that the future of Islam does not simply depend on the effectiveness of a few Muslim reformers but that the United States and Europe also have a major role to play. If short-sighted Western policies have helped to create the current impasse, they will, if not corrected, continue to have a negative effect upon the region, will weaken the cause of reform, and play into the hands of extremists. In the Qur'an, God calls all men and women to appreciate the unity and equality of the human race: "O people! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another" (49:13). One of the major tasks of our generation is to build a global community, where people of all persuasions can live together in harmony and mutual respect. In writing this book, which will help many Western readers to achieve a more balanced, informed, and nuanced appreciation of the Muslim world, Professor Esposito has made a major contribution.

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