

By Elaina Loveland

In Search of Understanding: Islam and the West

An interview with John L. Esposito, director of
Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian
Understanding at Georgetown University

JOHAN L. ESPOSITO IS UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR as well as professor of religion and international affairs and of Islamic studies at Georgetown University and is the founding director of its Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding in the Walsh School of Foreign Service. A consultant to the Department of State as well as corporations, universities, and the media worldwide, Esposito has served as president of the Middle East Studies Association of North America and the American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies, among other leadership positions.

Esposito is editor-in-chief of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (4 vols.), *The Oxford History of Islam*, a Book-of-the-Month Club and History Book Club selection, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, and *The Islamic World: Past and Present* (3 vols.). He was authored more than 35 books, some of the most popular being *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* and *Islam: The Straight Path*. Esposito's books and articles have been translated into Arabic, Persian, Urdu, bahasa Indonesia, Turkish, Japanese, Chinese and European languages.

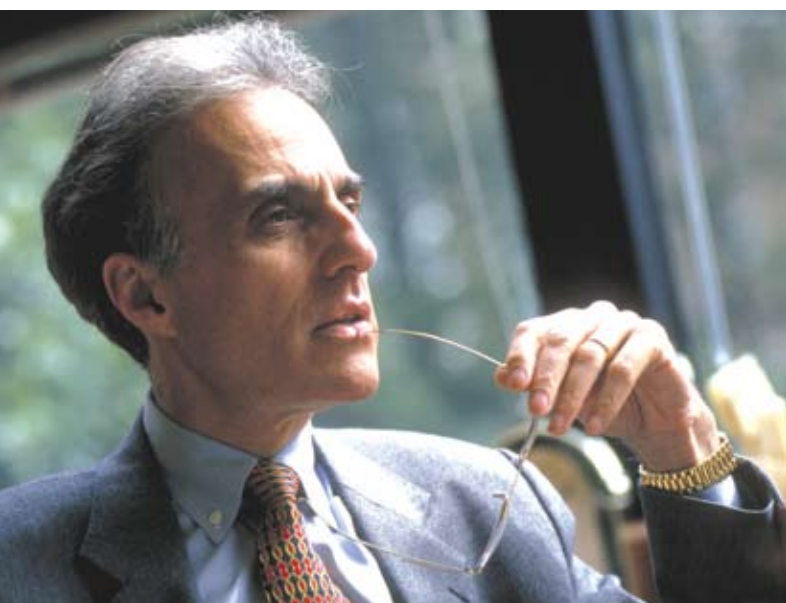
IE: Early in your career, expertise in Islamic studies wasn't a hot subject but nowadays it has become very much in demand. What do you think this says about a shift in cultural attitudes toward Islam and the Arab world?

ESPOSITO: One important factor is geopolitics; decades ago, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was minimal interest in Islam. What set things off was the Iranian revolution and then the various crisis points along the way. It's really the bottom line of the market—the geopolitics has changed.

Secondly, during the same time span, Islam went from being invisible in the West, either the second or third largest religion in Europe and America. So you've got the two influences dovetailing. Interest in the field would have been much slower in terms of interest if it were simply even the changing demographics. For example, nobody was interested in Vietnam and what put Vietnamese studies on the map was the Vietnam War, among other examples.

With the Middle East, we have a much more sustained situation where we've had an Iranian revolution, we had the Gulf War of 1990 and 1991 and then Osama bin Laden. Before the Iranian revolution,

"The Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding is concerned with Islam and the West and Islam in the West. The Center, since its creation in 1993, has built bridges of understanding between the Muslim world and the West, addressing stereotypes of Islam and Muslims and issues and questions such as the clash of civilizations, and the compatibility of Islam and modern life—from democratization and pluralism to the status of women, minorities and human rights—and American foreign policy in the Muslim world." —John L. Esposito



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

John L. Esposito, director of the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding

if you were to search in a library, you will see the difference before and after is there is an exponential growth in published books, and it's true if you talk about TV or media. It just gets spiked every time that something happens.

Also, with the realities now with globalization, both movements of people, as well as the issue of global terrorism will assure that this will remain on the agenda. Now you see it reflected in society. Whether you are talking about the FBI, the CIA, major think tanks, or the military, all of these organizations are developing units that deal with Islam. And there are now think tanks that have what they call Islamic studies programs. This would have been unheard of, even before September 11, 2001. For instance, when you look at these projects now on a panel or in a group that is organized by the U.N., you have former secretaries of state or foreign ministers. You have prominent media people, you have prominent academic experts, and you have terrorism experts. That wouldn't have happened a number of years ago. Policymakers wouldn't have been paying attention then. After September 11, I had a couple of very prominent people in Congress say to me, "You know, I know a lot about a lot of things, but I know nothing about Islam or Muslims."

IE: How did The Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding get started? Why did Georgetown see it as a priority?

ESPOSITO: The idea began with a prominent Palestinian businessman, Hasib Sabagh, and a group of other Arab businessmen, both Christian and Muslim, who were concerned after the fall of the Soviet Union that Islam would be (viewed as) the new global threat.

They came from the region, made their money in the region and so they felt they owed something to the region, but I think that some of them were also concerned about business and the future.

Hasib Sabagh had a foundation, *Fondation pour L'Entente entre Chretiens et Musulmans* (in Geneva), which no longer exists, but existed for a number of years in which these resources that he raised were placed. And that provided support for the center, which was established in 1993, its work, for roughly the first nine years. After nine years, we ran out of that funding and then I continued to raise monies for operating year to year. Happily, about a year ago, both Georgetown and Harvard received \$20 million endowments from Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal and that endowment has assured the future of the center.

IE: What has the Center brought to the institution? What is its mission?

ESPOSITO: I think that what is unique about the center is that from the beginning, we dealt with the relationship between the Muslim world and the West, between Islam and Christianity from a global perspective and in terms of history and international affairs. The center is located in the Walsh School of Foreign Service. So, we are not primarily a center for Muslim and Christian relations from a theological point of view—the Hartford Seminary has that kind of center that has existed for decades and it's a great center. But this center is at the intersection of religion and international affairs.

In many ways, we are an academic center and a think tank. It means that yes, we teach courses across the university and we service the university in this area, an area that, of course, has boomed. We also have developed a certificate program for undergraduates, the equivalent of a minor in Islam and Christian relations. Students can also do a liberal studies master's degree in that area. We are now a part of a new doctoral program in Arabic and Islamic studies.

The second component, of course, is research and publication. I think two things distinguish the center in this area. One, most of our research is always applying the past to the present or looking at the present. In other words, we are very much concerned with the modern Muslim world and relations between Islam and Christianity within the modern and contemporary period. My colleagues, who are trained in religion and history, when they write about the past, but they also write very much about the way that the past impacts on the present. Our work is very timely. We have books on Islam, Muslim-Christian relations, Islamic history, Muslim politics, Islamic movements, fundamentalism, global terrorism, and on women in Muslim societies—we do all of that.

Another distinctive area is what I call the 'think tank part' of what we do. We run workshops and conferences in different parts of the world. We produce occasional papers on a variety of issues. With secure long-term funding through the endowment, now we will be able to put together long-term, ongoing workshops, and also target one or two themes and form task forces that meet on a regular basis and address certain issues and subsequently, we will produce white papers, articles, and books on those issues.

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IE: What is the significance of the emphasis on “Muslim-Christian” understanding?

ESPOSITO: You can tell its significance by the way I use words to describe our work. For example, I will say the Muslim world and the West, and then I will use the terms Islam and Christianity. This is because what I am trying to say clearly is that this isn’t just about religion—it’s about religion, politics, culture, and international affairs. So if you say Islam and Christianity, people will immediately think that our work is just about religion but it’s about the intersection of religion, politics, and culture.

This focus is distinctive because before this center was established, there were many programs and projects and task forces and centers on Judeo-Christian relations, Judaism and Christianity, but there was very little dealing with Muslim-Christian relations. As I said, there was an initiative at the Hartford Seminary, but not many other places, and no institution was approaching the issues the way we do it—from the point of view of the *intersection* of religion, history, politics, and culture. And why is it significant? Well, among other reasons, before September 11, it was significant because Islam and Christianity were the two largest religions in the world. They are more global than all of the other world religions.

Just look at the numbers. There are about a 1.3 billion Muslims. Some people say that there are 2.1 billion Christians. In contrast, there are 14 million Jews. Even if the number of Hinduism and Buddhists are combined, in sheer numbers, Islam and Christianity are the two dominant mega-religions in the world, number-wise.

Also, they are the global religions in terms of their geographic expanse. There are 56 Muslim-majority countries and Islam and Christianity are global in terms of numbers of countries, and Islam and Christianity therefore meet and touch each other all over the world. And, in the last 30 years, Islam has gone from being invisible in the West to being the second or third largest religion in Europe and in America. So to deal with that encounter, to me, is extraordinarily significant.

And also there is another factor, which is that Islam and Christianity (that is, certain forms of Christianity) are among the fastest growing religions in the world. So you’ve also got that component in there. It’s not just that these are two very large religions, but they are two very large religions that are growing very, very quickly and they are here to stay. We have to keep dealing with them—it’s not that it’s big now and it’s going to drop off. It is going to be continual. And with the reality of the globalization, it becomes even more important to be dealing with it. And so I think the issues that we deal with, which run everywhere from international politics to, if

you will, domestic politics and the role of religion internationally and domestically in the West. Because as we like to say, we deal with Islam and the West and Islam in the West.

IE: Why is understanding Islam important in higher education both within the United States and internationally?

ESPOSITO: It’s important for a number of reasons. I’ll begin with a line that I used after September 11. I often said, “I have the best job in the world because for 30 years, people asked me the same questions.” But what does that say about our learning curve? (This applies to the United States and even European audiences.)

I am still asked the most basic question by policymakers, the media, and others. After September 11, Oxford asked me to write a kind of a post September 11 book. I wrote a book called *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*. At the time that I was writing it, my wife said to me, “You know, I really think that the book you need to write is a Q and A on Islam.” She reminded me that I was continually frustrated after September 11 when so many people—members of Congress, media people, and others—kept calling on me to answer the most basic questions. Does the Koran teach violence? Is Islam a particularly violent religion? Not are some Muslims violent, but the gut questions were questions that you would never raise about the heart of Judaism or Christianity. And so I did the Q and A, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*, and it took off—it’s not only used in academic places, but in the military. The fact that the basic Q and A book has sold so well says something about our society—we still need answers to the simplest questions, which isn’t an ideal place to be.

IE: How has academia changed its attitude toward the study of the Middle East and the Arab world in recent years, particularly since 2001?

ESPOSITO: When I began to teach, there weren’t any jobs in Islamic studies here. I got a job teaching world religions because I’m also trained in Hinduism and Buddhism and before that, I had a degree in Christian theology. I wasn’t even asked to teach Islam. In that era, when students studied for doctorates focused on the Muslim world, they came across Islam as part of the past and usually in a course on the history of politics. But nobody felt they really had to know a lot about that religion.

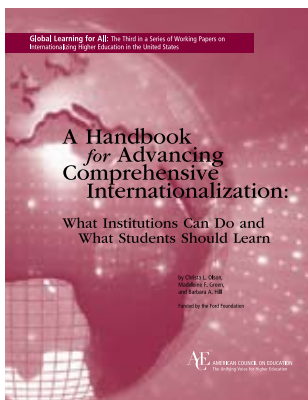
The whole notion of a Ph.D. in religion is only a matter of several decades old. There was no such thing as a Ph.D. in religion. If you did the equivalent of a doctorate in religion, up until the 1970s and until the 1980s, you did it at a seminary. The idea of an academic degree in religion was new.



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I think that what is important is that our students, when they get an education, they should be reading diverse voices. They should be reading Bernard Lewis and Edward Said of the older generation. They should be reading others of similar and different opinions and that should be part of the education.”

When doctoral programs in religions were started, they were focused on Christianity and Judaism. The idea of the Ph.D. that dealt with world religions was extremely rare and it is still a very recent in academia. And the study of Islam was the last thing to be looked at. It was more common to study Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism.

The penetration of the study of religion into colleges took much longer, let alone the whole issue about could we teach *about* religion. Note the phrase I used—it had to be *about* religion. Now I get students who come to me and as undergraduates, have studied world religions or studied some Islam, but we are still behind the curve. This is why it is so important. It is important to students in America, it is important to students in Europe. It's important to students in other parts of the world that they, (a) know other religions and (b), know something about Islam.

IE: Many Muslims today live outside of Arab countries but is this well-known?

ESPOSITO: The majority of Muslims live outside of the Arab world. People are beginning to recognize this, but it has been a slow learning curve. Only something like 23 percent of the world's Muslim are Arab. The vast majority of Muslims, the four largest Muslim populations, for example, are in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. And then after that, you are dealing with Nigeria.

People are only beginning to realize that, but even now, they still tend to equate (Muslim with Arab). No matter what that reality is the primary driver for (Western interest in Islam) has always been oil. Oil is primarily in the Arab world. It is also in Indonesia and Nigeria, but it's primarily in the Arab world. So that is why there is always this sort of as Middle Eastern focus and that's why people tend to think of it as that part of that world.

IE: Similarly, do you think there should be broader recognition that societies in the Middle East aren't exclusively Muslims but there is representations from three monotheistic religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—or is this already sufficiently understood?

ESPOSITO: Many Christians in the Arab and Muslim world resent this lack of recognition. For example, if they are Anglican or Lutheran or Catholic, you will get many of them saying, “Our co-religionists [Anglicans, Catholics, etc. from outside the Middle East] don't even know that we exist.” And if they are Palestinian, they often feel at times, “Gee, a lot of my Christian brothers and sisters seem to be militant Zionist in orientation in terms of their uncritical support of Israel, and think that all Palestinians are Muslims. Here we are and they don't know we exist.”

There is a danger of Christianity disappearing in the Arab world and many Arab Christians feel that they have been forgotten by their fellow Christians outside who don't think about them and who don't support them.

One of the things that we do in the center is to create programs that show the diversity of the region in terms of religion. There are significant minorities in Egypt, in Syria, and certainly Lebanon has a very large Christian minority. And you also still have a significant presence of Jews. Many Jews have emigrated outside of the Arab world, but you still have some important communities in Morocco and in other countries that are often overlooked or forgotten.

In the Palestinian and Israeli conflict, for example, people always think of it as Jews versus Muslims and forget that there is a significant number of Palestinian Christians who are involved. One of the more prominent Christian Palestinian leaders and Palestinian intellectuals, Edward Said and others, have been Christians.

IE: Given the beginnings of a broader awareness of Islam in Western society and in academia today, what do you see for the future of cooperation between Muslims and Christians globally?

ESPOSITO: I think that the real test is how we educate the next generation and the public. What is the content of that education? Are we educating them to see multiple perspectives?

I think that what is important is that our students, when they get an education, they should be reading diverse voices. They should be reading Bernard Lewis and Edward Said of the older generation. They should be reading others of similar and different opinions and that should be part of the education.

Students should be exposed to that kind of debate and our society needs to be exposed to it. If we don't do that, we have a problem because then we risk just educating or cloning little ideologues.

The reaction to President Carter's book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, is a perfect example. I mean, the fact that people simply came out and engage in personal attacks and condemn him. They engage in *ad hominem*-type arguments. For example, *The New York Times* review of President Carter's book was totally predictable.

You compare that to the review done by Henry Siegman—a very distinguished former expert, who was for many years on the Council on Foreign Relations—did a wonderful review on Carter's book and the issues that it raises. Mr. Siegman is an expert on the Middle East, he is Jewish in background, he has all of the right credentials and you see a balanced, nuanced approach. If you look at the review that appears in *The New York Times*, it is *ad hominem*. Some of the statements don't deal with content, they demean and insult instead.

And that's the language of ideological warfare. I think that that is one of the fallouts in the United States from the Bush administration years—things have gotten nastier. I recently spoke to a huge group in the World Affairs Council and I had more than one person get up and say that as they viewed the world, they just saw that we were a nastier society in terms of our discourse.

IE: If the discourse has gotten nastier, what can people on campuses do to reverse this?

ESPOSITO: I think that one of the great things that you are seeing with this generation, and I see it across campuses, there's a cut of young people in this generation who really want to know, who really want to get involved. They do that by, not only what they decide to major in, but by taking courses that open up their world. At Georgetown, our courses in the School of Foreign Service have the largest enrollment of any school or department in terms of majors, but also we teach probably the largest number of students in the university.

So today's college students really want to know about the world in which they live, and they do that in taking courses, but also from joining all kinds of clubs. That is what universities need, and they need to be doing. I think that at the best schools this is happening. For example, we have courses that cover every conceivable area

from a variety of perspectives and are taught by professors who have different perspectives.

We have organizations and associations and clubs that run programs that cover the world in which we live from a variety of perspectives, and that is good and healthy. You want to have conservative clubs and more liberal clubs. You want to have Jewish students, you want to have Arab students, you want to have varieties of Christian students and Muslim students.

Campuses need to have those resources at the fingertips of students, not where they have to go off campus. In other words, campuses have to internationalize. Now campus administrators know this, but they have to do it more and more. Not where we have single perspectives where people look and say, "Ah, we have an internationalized curriculum at that university"—and it goes one way and is one-sided. This is the wrong approach. Internationalizing, if done right for the betterment of students and the entire campus community, it must be done in a way that embraces all kinds of ideas and multiple viewpoints. People must remember that "internationalize" means internationalize in a diverse way. To truly reflect an international world in which we live, it's got to be with diversity. **IE**

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