

Interview - John Esposito

Written by E-International Relations

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John L. Esposito is University Professor, Professor of Religion & International Affairs and of Islamic Studies, and Founding Director of the Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at the Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University. Previously, he was Loyola Professor of Middle East Studies, at College of the Holy Cross.

Past President of the American Academy of Religion, Middle East Studies Association of North America, and the American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies, Esposito has served as consultant to the U.S. Department of State and other agencies, European and Asian governments, corporations, universities, and the media worldwide. He is a member of the World Economic Forum's Council of 100 Leaders and the E. C. European Network of Experts on De-Radicalisation and an ambassador for the UN Alliance of Civilization.

His more than 45 books include *The Future of Islam*, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*, *Islamophobia and the Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century*, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (with Dalia Mogahed), *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, *Islam and Democracy* (with J. Voll), *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, and *Islam and Politics, Political Islam: Radicalism, Revolution or Reform?*. He is Editor-in-Chief of Oxford Islamic Studies Online and Series Editor of the Oxford Library of Islamic Studies, and is Editor-in-Chief of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, *The Oxford History of Islam*, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, *The Islamic World: Past and Present*, and Oxford Islamic Studies Online. His writings have been translated into more than 35 languages.

In this interview, Professor Esposito discusses his career, the current state of IR scholarship on Islam, the rise of ISIS, and Islamophobia.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I have often marvelled that “an Italian-American kid from Brooklyn,” the first generation to graduate from high school and then college, raised and formed in an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic culture with minimal exposure to other religions and cultures, with the Capuchin Franciscans, training to be a priest, from the age of 14 until I left the monastery at 24 years of age, could become an academic, let alone have the life and experiences that I have had in my more than 40 year encounter with Islam and Muslims.

I received an MA in Theology from St. John's University and taught at Rosemont College. It was here that I would suddenly find myself as a young theologian in a world that was torn by the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and Vatican II reforms in Catholicism.

In 1955, Will Herberg's captured the landscape of America in *Protestant, Catholic, and Jew*. But, by 1965, theologians were talking about the impact of secularization on religion and theology: Harvard's Harvey Cox in *Religion In the Secular City* and “God is dead” theology. By the early 1970s, Harvey Cox authored *Turning East*, the response to the influx of Hindu gurus, Zen and Sufi masters, and immigrants from the East.

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An unexpected and major turning point in my life occurred at Temple University, where I went to major in Catholicism studied for my PhD in the late 1960s, and finished in 1974. In contrast to other institutions, all grad students in the Department of Religion, regardless of their major, were required to major in one world religion and minor in two others. I took a required one-year introductory course in world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese and Japanese religions, and Islam) with Bernard Philips, a charismatic teacher and the founder of the department, and never looked back, caught up in a new world of Hinduism and Zen Buddhism courses, intending to major in Hinduism. To my astonishment, Philips pressed me to take a course in Islam. Having acquired faculty in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Chinese religions, Temple was now developing its Islamic studies component. I knew little about Islam and my images were from movies like *The Exodus* (1960) and its biased view of Arabs, and *Lawrence of Arabia*.

I had now made the astonishing discovery that there was another global Abrahamic faith, the second largest religion in the world. The children of Abraham included not only Jews and Christians, but also Muslims.

Like all great teachers, Ismail al-Faruqi combined scholarship with an energy and passion for his subject that was contagious. At Temple, I learned Islam from both texts and context, from books, and from Muslim professors and grad students who came from Nigeria and Egypt, Pakistan and Malaysia. This unique feature of the program provided immediate insight not only into the unity but also the diversity of Islam from North Africa to Southeast Asia. I learned not only from texts, but also from the perspectives of believers, seeing Islam as a living/lived faith. Much to my surprise and to the surprise of others, I changed plans and majored in Islam while minoring in Hinduism and Buddhism. The reaction of colleagues – theologians, family, and friends were quick to ask: “Why study Islam? You’ll never get a job.” And they were correct.

Religion, and particularly Islam, has enjoyed considerable attention from International Relations (IR) scholars since 9/11. Prior to this, however, both Islam and religion in general were generally under-explored intellectual terrains in IR scholarship. Do you think IR scholars are better placed to understand the role of religion in international politics now than they were before the 9/11 attacks?

In contrast to today, until only a few decades ago in the US and Europe, Islam and Muslim were invisible on our cognitive and demographic maps. Knowledge and coverage of Islam and Muslims were negligible in media, schools, and universities, the training for the military and Foreign Service Officers. Islamic studies was primarily focused on the past, emphasizing the study of texts and history, not the role of religion in modern politics and society. This trend was reinforced in the social sciences, informed by the reigning belief in modernization and development theory, which conflated development and modernization with the westernization and secularization of societies. Religion was a legacy from the past, irrelevant or an obstacle to modernization and the building of modern nation states. Some wrote of the passing of traditional societies and that Muslims would have to choose between Mecca or mechanization. Most professional associations – the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), American Historical Association, American Political Science Association, International Studies Association, even American Academy of Religion (AAR) – had little to no coverage of Islam and religion in the public square. Scholars of Islam were few and far between. In fact, Temple University was the first university, at least that I know of, to introduce the study of World Religions and Islam in 1968 and offer a degree in a Religion Department. Until that time, scholars of Islam were trained in departments of Arabic language and literature or history. Religion Departments were, in fact, predominantly staffed with experts on Christian scripture and theology with minimal or no coverage of Judaism. When, in the 1970s, departments began to respond and broaden their offerings, most introduced World Religions courses and emphasized an expertise in Hinduism and Buddhism, not Islam. The Iranian revolution would dramatically prove a “game changer.”

Iran’s Islamic Revolution of 1978-79 transformed many lives, not only those in Iran and other parts of the Muslim world, but also US/European-Iran relations. Given Iran’s strategic location and the Shah’s long relationship with the US and threat to American national interests (the oil fields and our oil-producing allies in the Middle East) and the hostage-taking of American diplomats in our embassy, Iran’s Revolution and fears of an “Islamic fundamentalist threat” made careers. Reporters like Ted Koppel and *Nightline*, with its subtitle “America held hostage,” other journalists, and especially specialists in Middle East and Islamic studies, were catapulted out of the ivory tower and

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onto the lecture, consulting, and television circuits. For some scholars, if the 1970s were quiet private years, the 1980s and 90s were high-profile and fast-paced public years.

Political and demographic change during the 1980s and 1990s moved interest in Islam and Muslim politics from the periphery to centre stage. For those of us in the field, the famine became a feast: book contracts, speaking engagements all over the world, consulting jobs, and media appearances. A decade later, Saddam Hussein's invasion and occupation of Iraq, and followed by Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and especially 9/11 and subsequent attacks from London and Madrid to Bali, precipitated a "global war on terrorism" whose impact reinforced fears of a clash of civilizations, changed the dynamics of global politics, and resulted in a quantum increase in government agencies and terrorism experts and in security, Middle East, and Islamic studies, as well as the exponential growth of Islamophobia.

The horrific attacks by Al Qaeda on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, with subsequent terrorist attacks in London, Madrid, Bali, and elsewhere, and the rhetoric which called for a militant Jihad against the West, became the lens through which media and many in our societies came to view not only terrorist organizations, but also, for many, global Islam and Muslims. Fear of the religion of Islam and mainstream Muslims, not just fear and zero tolerance for Muslim extremists and terrorism, affected foreign and domestic policy.

International Relations (IR) was especially challenged by 9/11 and its aftermath. As I noted previously, the social sciences have ignored or dismissed the relevance and role in a modern nation state in which religion was, at best, a private matter antithetical to modern secular democracy and the public square. How was one to explain the resurgence of religion in politics and society, not only in Islam, but also in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism? How, in particular for those who saw modern education as producing a more secular-minded citizenry, was one to explain the role and involvement of modern educated leaders and followers (physicians, lawyers, engineers, journalists, and scientists who constituted an alternative elite to secular elites) as well as the less educated. The Social Science Research Council and others have attempted to address (to understand, analyze, and teach) these and other issues regarding the relationship of secularism and religion in modern states and societies, as well as form a committee to work on the development of curricula. When I first went to Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service (SFS), one of the oldest and leading schools of international affairs, to direct the newly created Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (CMCU), I was not only a professor of Islamic studies, but also the first professor of religion and international affairs, and there was no emphasis on politics and culture. Now, Culture and Politics (CULP) is a very popular major in SFS. There was only one (non-tenured) person in the entire university teaching Islam in the Theology Department. Now there are scholars of Islam (religion, politics, and society) in Theology, CMCU, and the Department of Arabic, renamed the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, as well as others. Today, in any good university or college, one expects to find faculty and courses in Islamic studies, not only in the humanities, but also in the social sciences.

ISIS is currently dominating international news headlines through its activity in Iraq and Syria, and there has been much discussion about effective ways to stop this militant Islamist group. What do you feel would be an effective response to ISIS?

As so often in the past (the Iranian Revolution, the rise and early successes of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda's spread internationally, etc.), the rapid expansion of ISIS (or IS) in (and then out of) Syria and into Iraq stunned the international community and is currently dominating international news headlines.

Containing and ultimately defeating ISIS will require both short- and long-term response. ISIS expansion has been made possible by political conditions in Syria and Iraq, ethnic-religious/sectarian divisions, and violence and terror in the region, and the failures of the US and international community.

Like Al-Qaeda and other militants, ISIS offers a militant, warped, and distorted Salafi ideology/religious rationale or rationalization to justify, recruit, legitimate, and motivate many of its fighters. Much of what they do violates Islamic law: its unabashed acts of terrorism, slaughter of civilians, savage use of beheadings, and killing of innocent Muslims, Yazidis, and Christians.

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While religion/Islam, a particularly harsh and distorted version, does play a role to legitimate, recruit, and motivate, studies of most jihadist and movements, like ISIS, show that the primary drivers are to be found elsewhere. As in the recent past, so too today, this has remained true for Europeans and Americans who have joined ISIS.

Studies by the EC's European Network of Experts on Violent Radicalization (of which I was a member) on radicalization in Europe, as well as those by terrorism experts like Marc Sageman and Robert Pape on global terrorism and suicide bombing, have found that, in most cases, religion is not the primary source of most extremist behaviour. Drivers of radicalization include moral outrage, disaffection, the search for a new identity, and for a sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging. For many, it is the experience or perception of living in a 'hostile' society, disenfranchisement, anti-imperialism, social injustice, and emancipation from occupation or corrupt authoritarian rulers.

At the end of the day, the peoples of the region (Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Gulf states) will have to deal with their problems. However, a substantial international commitment and involvement by the US, in consort with its European and Middle East allies (especially Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, and the UAE), is also needed. Support for Syria's weak and fractured moderate opposition, and for the new Iraqi president in strengthening Iraq's military and security forces, and, in some cases, carefully targeted military operations and aid, are important considerations.

But, in the long run, if we wish to break the cycle of global terrorism and its movements that have existed in recent decades, as Graham Fuller notes in "Avenging James Foley", the conditions and basic and enduring grievances in Muslim countries that jihadist terrorist movements have exploited in recent decades must also be addressed: "foreign boots on the ground, dictators supported by the US out of convenience, a failure to end a half century of Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, the treatment of Palestinians as a paradigm for treatment of other Muslims, the US employment of the region as an eternal cockpit for proxy wars—all of this is still ongoing."

You've been extensively involved in the promotion of strong ties between Muslims and Christians. At present, how do you assess the global relationship between Muslims and Christians, and what more can be done to improve relations?

The global relationship between Muslims and Christians in the Arab and broader Muslim world has both prospered and deteriorated. Great advances have been made not only in Muslim-Christian relations, but also in interfaith or multi-faith relations that include all major faiths. Major Muslim-Christian initiatives have occurred between the Vatican as well as the Archbishop of Canterbury, and in many countries at the national and local levels. The project and document "A Common Word between US and You" saw some 300 Muslim religious leaders reach out to the leaders of the Catholic, Anglican/Episcopal, and Protestant churches.

Sadly, at the same time, the rise of ultra-conservative, fundamentalist Christian and Muslim tendencies have reinforced a religious exclusivist worldview that is inimical to our increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. We see it domestically with anti-Muslim tirades by Pat Robertson, John Hagee, Rod Parley, and Franklin Graham, and Islamophobia in America and Europe. Internationally significant anti-religious conflicts between Muslims and Christians: clashes have occurred from Nigeria and Egypt to Pakistan and the Philippines.

Statements that denounce violence and terrorism, and encourage mutual understanding and respect, are important, but they require implementation. Senior religious leaders have to be put into operation in training programs in churches and madrasas for the next generation of priests, ministers, and imams; so too, more outreach programs for high school teachers, and more courses and programs in universities and colleges are important, as well as faith-based summer youth projects. Political leaders and the media have an important role to play. They cannot pander to the hardline religious right bias and bigotry for votes, and media has to balance its at times obsessive coverage of extremism with more coverage of the mainstream majority, their lives and beliefs. Failure to do so reinforces the dangers of anti-Muslim attitudes and behaviour.

In 2012, you produced a book with Nathan Lean titled *The Islamophobia Industry*, which explored the rise

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of fear and hatred of Muslims sweeping through the United States and Europe. How wide a problem do you feel Islamophobia is, and do you see it as a phenomenon not simply confined to the far right?

Islamophobia has been a social cancer metastasizing in America and Europe since the 1990s. Islamophobia is prejudice or hostility towards Muslims on the basis of their religious or ethnic identity. Criticism of Islamic theology and culture is not intrinsically Islamophobic, just as criticism of the tenets or cultures of other world religions does not necessarily indicate a prejudicial position towards those who subscribe to them. Islamophobia refers to bias and discrimination that often lead to discrimination and hate speech, ascribing collective blame on the majority of mainstream Muslims for the actions of Muslim extremists and terrorists, violence, hate crimes, or denial of civil liberties.

In contrast to the UK, where the term Islamophobia was coined in the 1990s (and now is used in Europe), no term existed, or was used, in the US until fallout from the construction of Park 51 (the so-called mosque at Ground Zero), the Islamic center in downtown Manhattan. *Time* magazine was the first major publication to do a cover story that asked "Is America Islamophobic?" Unlike anti-Semitism, racism, and homophobia, Islamophobia is still deemed culturally acceptable. It has yet to reach the threshold of being – at least publicly (broadcast, political establishment, etc.) – taboo.

Politicians, media commentators, hardline Christian Zionist preachers, and Islamophobic polemicists and websites – a dominant internet presence – have been enablers in its significant presence in popular culture.

Examples of the impact of Islamophobia in the US can be seen not only in incidents of hate speech and hate crimes, but also in the rhetoric and discourse in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, as well as the 2010 and 2012 congressional elections, and in the Park 51 protests and their aftermath.

In 2008, when Barack Obama visited Dearborn, some of his staff prevented his being photographed with young women wearing hijab, and many opponents labelled him a Muslim to discredit his candidacy. During the 2012 presidential election contest, every Republican candidate, either at that debate or in the two years before, had engaged in Islam and Muslim exceptionalism, questioning the loyalty of American Muslims, whether a Muslim could serve in the cabinet and under what conditions, the need to ban shariah law, etc.

You can see the impact during his presidency. President Obama has never visited a US mosque or sought a photo op at one. No Muslim has been appointed to a senior ambassadorship, and the number of visible senior members of the administration is negligible. Anti-Islam and anti-Muslim rhetoric became a topic in political contests in the 2010 congressional elections.

The building of an Islamic center in Manhattan near Ground Zero sparked a national debate and protest demonstrations. While there were diverse critics and reasons for opposition, prominent anti-Muslim activists played a major role in spearheading opposition, charging, among other things, that the Islamic center was a mosque that would be a monument to terrorism. Activists like Robert Spencer and Pam Gellar – who run websites including Freedom Defense Initiative, Stop Islamization of America (SIOA) (which the Southern Poverty Law Center listed as an anti-Muslim hate group in 2010), and Jihad Watch – mobilized media, particularly social media, and public demonstrations. They coined terms like the "Mosque at Ground Zero" and "Mega Mosque at Ground Zero."

In the aftermath of Park 51, a wave of anti-mosque activities swept from New York to California. This was also accompanied by some 29 states that have sought to pass anti-shariah laws to prevent its implementation, when in fact it's impossible to do so under our Constitution.

Mainstream media, driven by the bottom line and market share, is captured by the media mantra "If it bleeds, it leads." The effect of this approach can be seen in a Media Tenor report "A New Era of Arab Western Relations," which reviewed 975,000 news stories in US and European media outlets, and reported astonishing imbalance.

- In 2001, 2% of all news stories in Western media presented images of Muslim militants, while just over

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0.1% presented stories portraying ordinary Muslims.

- Jump to ten years later. In 2011, militant images went from 2% in 2001, to 25% in 2011. Yet, coverage of ordinary Muslims remained the same as 2001, at 0.1%.

Equally troubling and dangerous is the emergence of a cottage industry that has been meticulously cultivated by anti-Muslim polemicists and their resourceful funders, who master the domain of the internet with dozens of highly visible blogs and websites supported by hundreds of user blogs to which they link.

A 2011 study by the Center for American Progress found that, according to collected IRS tax returns, during a ten-year period, \$42.6 million flowed from seven major foundations to these Islamophobic authors and websites.

The 2013 CAIR report “Legislating Fear: Islamophobia and its Impact in the United States,” also with information taken from IRS returns, showed that, between 2008 and 2011, \$119,662,000 dollars total revenue were given to US-based Islamophobia networks.

A lot of literature has been produced on Islam since 9/11. Yet, arguably, there are a lot of what could be described as misleading and agenda-driven texts out there. For people, particularly students, wanting to learn more about Islam, how should they distinguish between honest and dishonest writers?

In contrast to forty years ago, Iran’s Islamic Revolution, and especially 9/11, led to an explosion in publications in Islamic and Middle East studies and in major reference works. At the same time, the internet has become an access point for vast information and disinformation. Given the diversity of materials and diverse intellectual and political orientations – for example, from Tea Party and neocon to liberal or progressive – all tend to describe as misleading and agenda-driven texts out there. Just as years ago one could find PhDs or experts from the best universities supporting the tobacco industry, and scholars from similar universities giving a totally different assessment, so too today, in areas of global politics and religion we find a similar situation. Therefore, it is important to know publishers and authors of information: what is their orientation, track record, etc. This is made easier with the use of Google!

One of the reasons Oxford University Press launched an ambitious series of reference works that now cover most areas from culture and politics to science, gender, and the arts, was to meet the need for providing the best scholarship available. Similarly, with regard to the internet, Oxford Islamic Studies Online offers internet access to major texts (primary and secondary sources, biographies, etc.).

Many of E-International Relations’ readers are students. What key advice would you give those wanting to focus their research on the Islamic world?

The most important lesson I have learned from all of my years as an academic and as a student of Islam and Muslim societies is the most obvious and yet elusive. If you want to know what people believe, if you want to grasp the reality of everyday life, you have to combine, to use the current academic jargon, “text and context.” Understanding the faith and lives of others requires knowledge of religion, history, politics, and culture. You need knowledge of sacred sources, as well as what people *actually* believe and do!

Appreciation of the essentials of a religion cannot exclude awareness of the diversity of its forms and expressions. However important the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament, understanding Judaism and Christianity also requires that you observe what Jews and Christians believe and practice in specific historical, cultural, and social contexts. Judaism is Torah and Talmud. Judaism in Ethiopia, Israel, and New York may have an underlying similarity, but in fact its cultural expressions differ enormously. Similarly, beyond their shared identification with Jesus Christ, Western Christians and their Eastern counterparts (Coptic, Melkite, Orthodox, Presbyterian, and Anglican) have rich theologies and practices that are conditioned by their unique historical and cultural experiences. Although many tend to see Islam and Muslims too often through images drawn from Saudi Arabia or Iran, Muslim practice (dress, the roles of women and society, song and dance) varies widely from Africa and Asia to America and Europe.

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This outlook has informed my work throughout the past 40 years. While I write about Islam (and other religions), the shared beliefs and practices of Islam, as well as its differing sects and schools of thought, I have always been drawn to seeing how the faith of Muslims plays out on the ground, in specific Muslim societies. At the same time, I have been acutely aware of the need to distinguish between the faith of the many and the twisted interpretations and actions of the few, the mainstream majority and a militant, extremist minority.

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This interview was conducted by Al McKay. Al is an Editor-at-large of E-IR.