

GREAT WORLD RELIGIONS: ISLAM, John L. Esposito
Chantilly, Va. The Teaching Company, 2003. Six CDs, with a 73 page Course
Guidebook)

I just drove 500 miles. What made the trip bearable, indeed, informative and interesting, was this CD series of lectures on Islam, written and spoken by Professor John L. Esposito. Esposito is professor of Religion and International Affairs and of Islamic Studies at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. His specialty is Islam, not only its historical roots, but also its presence and impact on North Africa, Southeast Asia and, especially since September 11, 2001, the West.

Esposito begins his lectures by reminding us that Islam is the second largest and fastest-growing religion in the world. It is present in 56 countries and has minority presence in Europe and the United States. There are 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, but I dare say the ones most of us are hearing about these days is the small minority who make the evening news by their sectarian violence and bombings. Despite their global presence, history of faith and rich culture, there are many myths, stereotypes and misinformation about Muslims.

Most of our Christian communities know little of Muslim beliefs, history and religious observances and, of concern to us preachers, they are not exempt from the stereotypes that persist today about Muslims. Sadly, many of these stereotypes are even perpetuated by the media. In addition, those of us in ministry, who were trained more than a decade ago, probably never had a course on Islam, have never read the Quran and have never visited a mosque. It was with my own sense of superficial knowledge about Islam that I set out on my trip with these recorded CDs. When I reached my destination, I had gained much information, many insights and a deeper appreciation for this great religious tradition.

There are twelve lectures in this course beginning with Muhammad's life and teachings. Esposito discusses the similarities and differences among the three great "Abrahamic faiths"—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. While we share many core beliefs--- the transcendent God who created and sustains the universe, the prophets, revelation, moral responsibility, eternal reward and punishment, the mercy and compassion of God—there are distinct differences. For example, though Muslims believe Jesus was an important prophet, they do not believe he is God's son. Muslims also do not believe in separation of "church" and state; for the devout, religion and society are intimately intertwined.

The first six lectures are about the origins and the core Muslim beliefs: the "Five

Pillars of Islam;” Muhammad’s teachings and deeds (considered, with the Quran, to be divine revelation); the application of revelation to religious practices and living in the world; Islamic law and mysticism (e.g. Sufism) and the early division into Sunni and Shii.

Throughout these lectures one learns of the riches and depths of Islamic faith and comes to appreciate why so many people in the world, despite ethnic, cultural, racial and economic differences, are drawn to it. The listener can also understand how a few extremists have jeopardized the good will of non-Muslims by their actions and misrepresentations of Islamic teachings. For instance, the word “jihad” sends chills down our spines when we hear it shouted by extreme Islamic groups. The word means, “struggle” or “exertion.” When applied to persons it refers to one’s struggle against vices and excesses. Jihad is the internal “warfare” of self-discipline that enables a person to live a virtuous life. It also applies to a community’s struggle against injustice, racism, ignorance, poverty, etc. It can take on a violent meaning when that community unites to defend itself against aggression. Muhammad said that the greater and more important jihad is the internal one against one’s ego, selfishness, greed and evil.

Throughout these lectures Esposito returns to the primary sources of the Islamic faith, the Quran and teachings and example of Muhammad. We learn that the Quran teaches the equality of men and women and that pluralism and tolerance are stressed because Muslims believe God has created not one, but a diversity of peoples and nations. Therefore, people are not to be coerced to convert to Islam. But hasn’t history shown us Muslim domination, conquest and subjugation of peoples? Yes, Esposito admits, because, as with Judaism and Christianity, Islam has sometimes been used by worldly powers for the purpose of conquest and riches.

The second half of the lectures examines the challenges Islam faces in the modern world. Muslims have either adapted to or reacted against modern states, religions and customs----for example, democracy, globalization, the role of women, manner of dress, social status, education, etc. Since the last decades of the 20th century Islam has experienced a revival in both the personal and public life of Muslims. Many became religiously observant. Also, new Islamic governments were established in countries like Iran, Sudan and Afghanistan. In this period of renewal emerged mainstream male and female Islamic activists who lead governments, served in parliaments, entered the professions as doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc. At the same time, radical organizations were formed and have engaged in violence and acts of terrorism that threaten individuals, communities and governments.

Islam is at a crossroads. Believers face the challenge of defining Islam's role in both private and public life. The major issues are the relationship of religion to state and society; the place of Islamic law; the status and role of women and non-Muslims; Islam's stance towards democracy and the Western nations. At the heart of these issues is the question: who will have the most persuasive voice in the Muslim community, the minority extremists or the saner minds that speak for the majority? The latter speak from various perspectives, conservative, traditional and modern, but they represent the heart of Islam's faith which, from the time of Muhammad, has spoken for religious and social reform, law, theology, mysticism, philosophy, mathematics, medicine, art and architecture. Esposito reminds us that while the western world was slowly emerging from the dark ages, Islamic civilization was already flourishing.

The lectures on Islam are part of "The Great Courses" series and it really is a course. The twelve lectures are on six CDs. Also included is a 73-page course guidebook with: detailed summaries and outlines of each lecture, a historical time line, biographical notes on past and present Islamic leaders, a glossary and a bibliography for further study. You may decide, as I did, to listen to the CDs while driving, and then to do a follow-up study with the guidebook. Whatever your approach, the results will be similar to mine: a sense of time well spent, studying and appreciating a people and faith we Westerners need to learn a lot more about, lest the more intolerant voices against Islam in our society become the ones people listen to and follow.

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