

Book review

John Derksen

Islam: Religion, History and Civilization, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003.

This readable survey of the religion, history, and civilizational contributions of Islam, written after the events of September 11, 2001, has particular relevance for pastors and churches. Author Seyyed Nasr, a Muslim of Iranian origin who teaches at George Washington University in Washington, DC, depicts Islam in a way that enables Western non-Muslim readers both to learn about Islam and to glimpse the world through Muslim eyes.

A strong introduction sketches the history of Islamic studies in the West and identifies key contributions of Islam to the world. Chapter 1 surveys Islam's geography, its essence, and its inner unity and diversity. Chapter 2 summarizes the private and public roles of religion in Islam and lays out its spiritual foundations in the Qur'an, in commentaries on the Qur'an, in the Prophet Muhammad, and in the exemplary traditions about the prophet (hadith). Chapter 3 sets forth Islam's doctrines and beliefs about God, prophecy and revelation, the angelic world, the human state, men and women, the cosmos, and eschatology. Chapter 4 outlines Islam's legal dimensions (sharia), and its Sufi spiritual dimensions.

Chapter 5 describes Islam's visible practices and institutions: the Five Pillars, the meaning of jihad, Islamic ethics, the family, and economic and political structures. Chapter 6 presents a majestic sweep of Islamic history from its origins to the present. Besides identifying key epochs and players, Nasr draws suggestive connections over large periods of time, such as those between the Seljuks and the Ottomans. Chapter 7 describes the schools of Islamic thought: theology, spiritual metaphysics, and philosophy. The book concludes with reflections on Islam in the contempo-

rary world (chapter 8). While defending his own “traditional and spiritual” perspective, Nasr criticizes both the modernists, with their Western rationalism, and the “fundamentalists,” with their inexcusable violence, for wrongly borrowing un-Islamic tools to achieve “Islamic” ends (184–85).

Although much of the content is standard introductory fare, and although more is needed on Muslim contributions in mathematics and science, the book includes some unique and valuable offerings. With surveys of Islam in black Africa, Southeast Asia, and China, the book’s scope is truly global. The frequent mention of the Shia, Sufis, and Persia points to Nasr’s background and spiritual orientation. His balanced, irenic approach affirms Western non-Muslim scholars who portray Islam with objectivity, accuracy, and sympathy (xv–xvi, 150). Despite strong criticism of Western economic and political influence, his references to Christianity are often sympathetic and his critiques gentle.

Nasr also acknowledges shortcomings within the Muslim community. He admits failures of Uthman, the third caliph, rejects the near hagiography of Muslim heroes displayed by some Muslim writers, and mentions internal debates such as those on Islam’s relation to Confucianism in China (148). However, on the spread of Islam, he highlights the peaceful Sufi propagation and remains silent about brutal conquests. On the forces that hastened the Islamic world’s decline from 1600 to 1900, the book bypasses the Muslim world’s internal decay in favor of exclusive focus on external Western conquest.

This gentle survey of Islam as seen through Muslim eyes is a first-rate introduction. Given the author’s traditional, orthodox, and irenic posture, and his solid understanding of the Western mind, the book builds a bridge to Western readers from the Muslim side. For pastors seeking to help parishioners understand and relate to Muslim neighbors, reading this book is a must. Muslims of a legalistic or narrow-minded bent may also find in this book a refreshing spiritual breeze.

About the reviewer

John Derksen is Assistant Professor of Conflict Resolution Studies at Menno Simons College in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He spent nine years in Egypt and Lebanon.