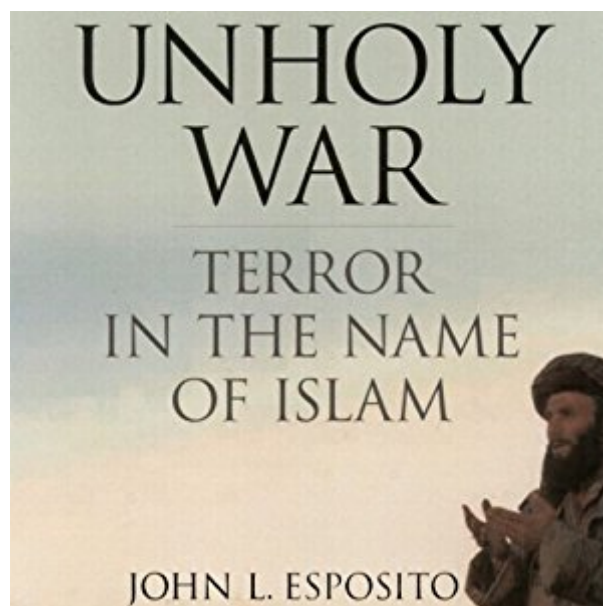


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Unholy War: Terror In The Name Of Islam



Synopsis

The September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon left us stunned, angry, and uncomprehending. As it became clear that these horrifying acts had been committed in the name of religion, the media, the government, and ordinary citizens alike sought answers to questions about Islam and its adherents. In this level-headed and authoritative book, John L. Esposito, one of the world's most respected scholars of political Islam, provides answers. He clearly and carefully explains the teachings of Islam - the Quran, the example of the Prophet, Islamic law - about jihad or holy war, the use of violence, and terrorism. He chronicles the rise of extremist groups and examines their frightening worldview and tactics. Anti-Americanism (and anti-Europeanism), he shows, is a broad-based phenomenon that cuts across Arab and Muslim societies. It is not just driven by religious zealotry, but by frustration and anger at U.S. policy. It is vital to understand, however, that the vast majority of Muslims are appalled by the acts of violence committed in the name of their faith. It is essential that we distinguish between the religion of Islam and the actions of extremists like Osama bin Laden, who hijack Islamic discourse and belief to justify their acts of terrorism. This brief, clear-sighted book reflects twenty years of study, reflection, and experience on the part of a scholar who is equally respected in the West and in the Muslim world. It will prove to be the best single guide to the urgent questions that have recently forced themselves on the attention of the entire world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

John Esposito is the author of one of the very best introductions to Islam currently available, *ISLAM: THE STRAIGHT PATH*, and is one of the most respected Islamic scholars currently working in the US. It was with enormous excitement that I discovered that Esposito had written a book that addresses the concerns that most Americans and Europeans have in the wake of 9-11. This book is invaluable for understanding both the variety of traditions in Islam concerning Jihad, a term which means, simply, "struggle", and not, as many in the US imagine, something akin to "war". This "struggle" is most often, as Esposito explains, spiritual than military, and he is outstanding at showing the wide variety of views concerning the forms "jihad" can take. Even for those who believe in a military "jihad" Esposito demonstrates that there are many viewpoints. He is also superb at integrating these varying understandings with the origins of Islam. One of his great achievements is in showing that just as there is enormous diversity in Christianity (just compare the beliefs of Anglicans, Southern Baptists, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, Roman Catholics, Russian Orthodoxy, Pentecostals, Unitarians, Jehovah Witnesses, and Presbyterians, to take merely a few Christian traditions, and the point is grasped), so also there is a vast amount of diversity in Islamic belief. He points out that the vast majority of Muslims do not countenance violence against innocent civilians. The focus, however, of this book is on that minority that embraces violence. Esposito discusses not only traditional Islamic teachings on Jihad and the relations of Islam with non-Islamic individuals and countries, but also 20th century thinkers and activists. This was the part of the book I found most helpful.

Having read a few of John Esposito's other books I had come to appreciate him as one of America's most level-headed analysts of things Islamic. That is why the first chapter of 'Unholy War' was somewhat disappointing. The description of Osama bin Laden's career as a militant Muslim appeared not to differ very much from many other, superficial accounts of this new 'posterboy' of international terror. Thankfully this unease was dispelled by the remainder of the book, where Esposito shows himself again as somebody with a willingness to understand, without becoming apologetic. For in the second chapter the author seems to regain his composure when he constructs a genealogy of the Islamic Jihad doctrine. The reader is guided through the earliest time of Islam, via the lone medieval figure of Ibn Taymiyya and the 18th-century revivalist Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, to three exponents of modern-day Islamic reformism: the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna, the Pakistani writer-activist Maulana al-Mawdudi, and the chief ideologist of Islamic radicalism, Sayyid Qutb. As this chapter only gives a brief account of the development of the Jihad concept, there are certain unavoidable generalizations. Unfortunately the

depiction given of Shi'ism is somewhat simplistic. However, with this historical account Esposito makes the less-informed reader aware of the fact that the past is of great importance for giving meaning and guidance to Muslim identity. Crucial in this section of the book is the underscoring of the fact that Muslims disagree among themselves about the exact meaning of Jihad. The fact that until to date the United States government judged Islam's holy and unholy warriors by their goals is another excellent observation.

"Unholy War" offers what many longtime Esposito readers will recognize instantly: a straightforward assessment of Islamic society from the diverse perspectives of religion, politics, economics, and human rights. Moreover, it does a reasonable job of spanning the globe to embrace the diverse character of the Muslim world that is often portrayed monolithically by Westerners (including many Western scholars). The book is packed with information—remarkably so given its brevity (160 pages of actual text). Filled with descriptions of major figures and formative events in the history of Islamic culture, it also includes many Arabic terms and even Muslim idioms that are obviously intended to educate the reader. Most pertinent, however, given the contemporary world's fixation on terrorism, is Esposito's exploration of the supposed theological foundations of terrorist activity within Islam, especially his description of the fundamentalist Wahhabi Islam exported from Saudi Arabia. Esposito posits that the association of Wahhabism with terrorist groups often has been exaggerated by governments (especially those in Central Asia) to deflect attention from their "failed economies, corruption, and self-interested power holders," and that this "blanket use of Wahhabi to describe militant jihad groups obscures more than it enlightens" (p. 111). What Esposito inserts in place of a direct connection between Wahhabism and terrorism are "unintended consequences" in the institutionalization of Wahhabi Islam, "as witnessed by the Taliban bin Laden alliance and jihadi madrasas" (p. 111).

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