

Reading up on Islam

by [Marcia Z. Nelson](#) in the [January 16, 2002](#) issue

The enormity of the events of September 11 sparked unprecedented demand for books on Islam and the Middle East. For a while in fall 2001, books about Islam, Osama bin Laden and Afghanistan made bestseller lists, as readers played catch-up by devouring university or specialty press titles by scholarly and policy experts. Books by journalists with experience in the varied cultures of the Muslim world have also offered compelling looks inside parts of the world unknown to most Americans.

Naturally, some of the recent books are more worth reading than others. Some are particularly heavy with agenda-setting in the current volatile political context; some are simply fortunate enough to feature “Taliban” in the title or an eye-catching photo of Osama bin Laden on the cover.

An author who appears to be answering many Americans’ questions is Karen Armstrong, a prolific British writer and former nun. *Islam: A Short History* (Modern Library, 2000) has sold well from the start, and has been on religion best-selling lists and for a time made the general best-selling lists as well. Armstrong’s gift lies in mastering detail and in being accessible. She brings depth and breadth through a comparative-religions perspective. Two of her other works, *The Battle for God* (Ballantine, 2001) and *A History of God* (Ballantine, 1994), look at the comparative development of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Many more authorities in the field can be found in university-press publishing, where the mission of promoting advancement of knowledge is invariably a less commercial operation, authors less high-profile and accessibility not necessarily a criterion for getting published. Demand quickened the usual pace of life at some university presses. At Yale University Press, for example, demand ballooned tenfold—from 20,000 sold to 200,000 shipped—for copies of *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, by Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, a 20-year veteran of Afghanistan coverage. Yale has accelerated production on Rashid’s next work, due in February, on jihad, a term frequently translated as “holy war” but also as “struggle,” both translations offering a variety of connotations. Post-September

11 interest prompted sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer to update and write a new preface for his *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (University of California Press).

While many university presses have one or a few authors with relevant religion or policy specialties, Oxford University Press has developed an extensive publishing program in Islamic studies, anchored by such scholars as John Esposito and Yvonne Haddad, colleagues at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. Esposito, author or editor of several encyclopedic publications and a frequently quoted expert, will add to his already lengthy publication list with *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, scheduled for spring. Haddad's *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens* will also be published in spring, as will a paperback edition of *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*, by Reuven Firestone, an expert on Middle Eastern religions, and *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*, by Marc Gopin, a conflict-resolution specialist at Tufts University who is also an ordained rabbi.

Journalist Geneive Abdo's *No God but God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2000) examines the grass-roots revival of Islam in Egypt, a development that is postcolonial, populist, a hybrid of traditionalism and modernity and uniquely national. Abdo's analysis is fresh, nuanced and grounded in extensive interviewing and observation in that country. *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford University Press, 2001), by Abdulaziz Sachedina, a professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia and a policy analyst, uncovers a Qur'anic basis for democratic values.

Like Haddad, other scholars have been examining the coming of age of Islam in this country. A collaborator with Haddad in an earlier work, Jane I. Smith of Hartford Seminary, wrote *Islam in America* (Columbia University Press, 1999), a reflection on the increasing Islamic presence in the contemporary American religious landscape. Sulayman Nyang of Howard University, a former diplomat, brings the perspective of an African-born Muslim to his work on *American Islam: Islam in the United States of America* (Kazi, 1999). Nyang's work is also a reminder of the importance of Islam among African-Americans.

An earlier generation of Islamic scholars pointed the way toward a deeper understanding of this world religion. Among these pioneers are the late Fazlur Rahman of the University of Chicago and historian Bernard Lewis, the "American

patriarch of Islamicists.” Edward Said’s watershed *Orientalism* (Vintage paperback, 1979) challenged the way most Western and American intellectuals had viewed Islam.

Scholars who focus on the spirituality of Islam include William Chittick of the State University of New York and Seyyed Hossein Nasr at George Washington University, both of whom have also written extensively about Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam.

The religious and political expressions of Islam and an Islamic way of life are intertwined in complex and varying ways around the globe. A second major interpretive approach by Westerners emphasizes the political history and current events shaping Islamic states. Books taking this approach analyze politics and policies, traditionalism and modernity, conflict and terrorism as political expression.

Featuring the unmistakable likeness of its subject on the cover, Yossef Bodansky’s best-selling *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (Prima, 1999) is a detailed, unfootnoted 406-page narrative of the life and context that produced the terrorist leader. Bodansky’s credentials as a terrorism expert and consultant to the U.S. government are well known. Less well known are his pro-Israeli ties—to the Freeman Center for Strategic Studies, a Texas think tank which says it “attempts to aid Israel in her quest to survive in a hostile world,” and to the Ariel Center for Policy Research, in Israel. Bodansky’s book illustrates one kind of advice the Bush administration is probably getting. An eloquent and often-cited voice of Palestinian and Arab perspectives is Fouad Ajami of Johns Hopkins (*Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation’s Odyssey*, Vintage paperback, 1999), a former MacArthur fellow.

More policy analysis and viewpoints likely to influence the American establishment can be found in *How Did This Happen? Terrorism and the New War* (Public Affairs), edited by James F. Hoge Jr. and Gideon Rose, a book put together quickly by the publisher Public Affairs and the influential journal *Foreign Affairs*. Another quick book, *The Age of Terror: America and the World After September 11* (Basic Books, 2002), edited by Strobe Talbott and Nayan Chandra, is co-published with the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization.

A growing number of books is dismantling the notion that Islam is monolithic. *In the Shadow of the Prophet: The Struggle for the Soul of Islam*, by former *New Yorker* correspondent Milton Viorst (Westview Press, 2001), and *Islam and Democracy: Fear*

of the Modern World (Perseus, 1993), by Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist and feminist, both offer nuanced looks at social and political ferment within Islam. *Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity Among the Daudi Bohras*, by Jonah Blank (University of Chicago Press, 2001), is fascinating despite its sleeper subtitle. Blank, a dashing-looking Indiana Jones type, albeit an anthropologist with journalistic experience, studied an Indian Shi'a Muslim subculture which is developing a unique Islamic way of life marrying the traditional and the modern.

Compelling and far less social-scientific, with its story of Christian martyrdom in the political maelstrom of the 1990s in Algeria, is *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love and Terror in Algeria* (St. Martin's, 2002) by John W. Kiser III, an author with a technology background and nonprofessional experience in foreign affairs. A timely entry to the vast treasury of Islamic jurisprudence, a field containing centuries of interpretation and application of Islamic law, is afforded by a special 600-page issue of the *Journal of Religion and Law*, published by the Hamline University School of Law in St. Paul, Minnesota, and released in fall 2001. Journal contributors, including U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, survey issues of human rights, women's rights, nonviolence and peacemaking, and civil liberties.

The status of women in Islam is a subject at once fascinating and challenging. The symbolism of the traditional veil suggests a world ostensibly far from American sensibilities. A number of recent books explore this crucial aspect of Islamic life. *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (Anchor, 1996) is a readable volume by foreign correspondent Geraldine Brooks. Fatima Mernissi has written several works, among them *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (Perseus, 1992). *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), by Leila Ahmed, a women's studies professor at Harvard Divinity School, chronicles the author's personal journey. A groundbreaking portrait of young American Muslims, sons and daughters of the wave of 1960s and 1970s immigrants, is provided by Asma Gull Hasan, a Pakistani-American, in *American Muslims: The New Generation* (Continuum, 2000).

Specialty publishers are, and have always been, a gold mine of resources on Islam. Chicago-based Kazi Publications, the oldest and largest Muslim publisher and distributor of books on Islam in North America, stocks dozens of Qur'ans and commentaries among its 2,000 specialty titles on Islam, drawing on many foreign publishers and supplying books to American Muslims. One of its most popular

post-September 11 titles is *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims*, by Suzanne Haneef, an American Muslim. Amana Publications in Beltsville, Maryland, publishes and sells Qur'ans and books sympathetic or sensitive to an Islamic perspective. *Silent No More: Confronting America's False Images of Islam* (2001), by former Illinois congressman Paul Findley, has sold well. Fons Vitae, in Louisville, has an eclectic list of texts of world religions, with strengths in the mystical traditions. Advanced students of Islam can find there works by the great Islamic thinker Al-Ghazali and others.

Finally, there are books that make their values clear from the outset. One popular title is *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, by Ibn Warraq (Prometheus, 1995), a controversial former Muslim who writes critically about the faith he left. Also selling is *Islam Revealed: A Christian Arab's View of Islam*, by Anis A. Shorosh (Thomas Nelson, 1988), from an evangelical Christian perspective. *The Road to Mecca*, by Muhammad Asad (Fons Vitae, reissue 2001), an Austrian journalist who converted to Islam in 1926, is often cited as a well-written explanation of conversion to Islam by a Westerner.