

John L. Esposito, Georgetown University



John L. Esposito is a university professor, professor of religion and international affairs and of Islamic studies at Georgetown University. He is also the founding Director of the Center for Muslim–Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. Esposito is editor-in-chief of The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World

*,
The Oxford History of Islam
(a Book-of-the-Month Club selection),
The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*

,
and

Oxford Islamic Studies Online

. His more than forty books include

The Future of Islam

(Oxford University Press, 2010);

Who Speaks for Islam?: What a Billion Muslims Really Think

(coauthored with Dalia Mogahed, Gallup Press, 2008);

Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam

(Oxford University Press, 2003);

What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam

(Oxford University Press, 2002);

Women in Muslim Family Law

(Syracuse University Press, 1982); and

Islam: The Straight Path

(Oxford University Press, 1988).

His writings have been translated into more than thirty languages. A former President of the Middle East Studies Association of North America and the American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies, and member of the World Economic Forum's Council of 100 Leaders, Esposito is an ambassador for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and a member of the European Council's Network of Experts on Deradicalization. Esposito has received the American Academy of Religion's 2005 Martin E. Marty Award for the Public Understanding of Religion and the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University Award for Outstanding Teaching.

RSN: How did your parents and your extended family influence your early career and education?

Esposito: I grew up in a working class Italian-American Catholic family and neighborhood in Brooklyn, in an apartment whose heat and hot water were controlled by a “thrifty–cheap” landlord. For those who remember the TV show *Welcome Back Kotter*, we lived near New Utrecht High School — the school the program was based upon.

We were a very tight-knit family: loving and dedicated parents, grandmother, and the “three boys.” Although my father was very bright, he had to drop out of high school in his first semester to support my grandmother. My mother obtained a high school equivalency degree. Both my parents were passionately committed to the best possible education as the way forward for their children in a neighborhood where only a handful of other children would follow the same path. They took an active interest in our studies and all three of us went on to university. The goal of most of the kids in the neighborhood was to get a job like their fathers or older brother, so education at its best meant going to grammar and high school. My middle brother, Lou, became an economist, dean, and vice chancellor. The youngest, Rick, started a PhD program in philosophy but, with few job expectations, eventually became a senior vice president with a major New York bank.

I, the oldest, stunned everyone when I decided at the age of fourteen to become a Capuchin Franciscan, entered their juniorate, and then studied philosophy (BA), followed by theology. I left the order at twenty-four, two years shy of ordination.

Jean Esposito, my wife and partner of almost forty-eight years, has had the most formative and long-lasting impact on my intellectual and professional development. From when we both were in graduate school and later, first as an academic and then a senior corporate leader, she then as now always finds time to read, critique, and edit my work — a critique I valued highly but did not always accept graciously [smile].

RSN: At what point did you decide you wanted to become a scholar of religion?

Esposito: After I left the monastery, I was a management trainee at Prudential’s home office. It was quite a feat securing the job — you can imagine the challenge answering the typical background questions when you have been out of circulation for ten years. I initially thought of going to graduate school, but decided, if I really wanted to be a teacher and influence lives, that high school teaching (Latin and English) would enable me to provide an early influence and impact to children. A Catholic pastor who interviewed me for a position questioned my sanity in leaving the corporate world to take a significant pay cut — the offer was \$3,800! Soon after

starting to teach high school, I realized I was not cut out to deal with the discipline problems. At the end of one afternoon, I told my homeroom students I would be right back. I found myself heading towards the front door and meeting the nun–principal who was waiting at the base of the stairs to catch students who might try to sneak out early [smile].

I returned to my original plan — graduate school to obtain an MA in theology, followed by a position (1966–1972) in the theology department at Rosemont College, PA. At the same time, I pursued a doctorate at Temple University in Philadelphia, attracted by the fact that I could major in Roman Catholic thought at a secular university rather than pursuing the standard practice of going to a Catholic university.

Temple University’s religion department was distinctive for many reasons; in particular, its emphasis on the world’s major religions. All PhD students were required to take a one-year course in world religions, and major in one religion and minor in two others. For me, the exposure to world religions was amazingly transformative. I switched my focus from Catholicism to Hinduism and Zen Buddhism. Encouraged by my professor to write a dissertation in Hindu studies, I informed the chair — but to my astonishment, he suggested that I study Islam!

My initial response, “Why study Islam?”, was reinforced by colleagues in Catholic studies who exclaimed: “Why go into that *abra kadabra* field? You’ll never get a job.” So, what eventually attracted me to this line of study?

I had an extraordinarily gifted and dynamic professor, Ismail al-Faruqi, and most of the graduate students were Muslims from Egypt, Nigeria, Malaysia, Indonesia, and elsewhere. I was the first to finish my PhD and years later was informed at a conference on Kuala Lumpur that I was remembered as the “Don of the Temple Mafia.”

In those days, Judaism and Christianity were distinguished from Eastern religions; Islam was lumped together with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Chinese and Japanese religions. I was astonished to discover that Muslims too were among the Children of Abraham and thus that beyond the Judeo–Christian tradition was a Judeo–Christian–Islamic tradition. If Muslims recognized many of the major patriarchs and prophets of Judaism and Christianity (including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus) and God’s revealed books, the Torah and the Message (New Testament) of Jesus, why had I not been aware of this after all my years of liberal arts and theological training? In addition, I discovered a history, or better perspective, on world history and the role of Islam in history, politics, and civilization — classical and modern.

RSN: What has compelled you to research, publish, and lecture in the area of international affairs and Islamic studies?

Esposito: Given the very tight job market in religious studies at the time (1972) and lack of interest in Islam, “I was trained for unemployment.” But Temple graduates like me, with a little luck, proved marketable because we could teach world religions and courses in three traditions — in my case four, given my MA in theology. I was hired at the College of the Holy Cross where I taught world religions, and courses on Hinduism, Buddhism, and others like “Mystics and Zen Masters.” But when it came to Islamic studies, I was like the man in the Maytag commercials, sitting in my office waiting for the phone to ring — book proposals went unanswered or I was informed, “interesting idea, but no market.” Publication outlets for articles on Islamic law or women and Muslim family reforms were limited in the United States. Panels at major professional meetings (the AAR, MESA, ISA, AHA, and APSA) on Islam or Muslim politics were rare and very poorly attended. And then along came the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979 — the rest is history!

The combination of the impact of the 1973 Arab oil embargo, which initially underscored the strategic importance of the Middle East, was increased exponentially by the Iranian revolution and creation of an Islamic republic that threatened America’s perceived national interests, access to oil, and the security of Israel. Policymakers and the media became traumatized and fixated by the fear of an export of Iran’s “Islamic fundamentalist” revolution.

Iran’s revolution and fears of an “Islamic fundamentalist threat” made careers. ABC launched its nightly program (later becoming *Nightline*), “The Iran Crisis — America Held Hostage.” Specialists in the Middle East and Islamic studies were catapulted out of the ivory tower and onto the lecture, consulting, and television circuits. If the 1970s were quiet private years, the 1980s and 1990s were high profile, fast-paced public years.

Having spent years of sending out book proposals that received no responses or the occasional “great topic but no market” reply, my expertise in Islam and the Middle East suddenly became part of a growth industry. In five weeks, I signed three book contracts with major presses. The phone rang incessantly. Government officials, corporate leaders, and reporters struggled to understand the nature, impact, and implications of the overthrow of a wealthy, well-armed modernizing Iran by a revolution led by an elderly bearded cleric living in exile in France. The bias of the social sciences and of modernization theory in ignoring the role of religion in international affairs and equating modernization with the secularization and Westernization of

society produced area specialists with little knowledge of Islam and its role in Muslim societies. As one scholar put it, Muslims had to choose between Mecca and mechanization.

RSN: Can you tell us about your current academic life at Georgetown University?

Esposito: I wear several hats at Georgetown University — university professor, professor of religion and international affairs, and professor of Islamic studies. I have taught courses on religion and international affairs, Islam and politics, women in Muslim societies, Islam and the West, Islam, global terrorism, and the Arab Spring. I am also founding director (1993) of the Alwaleed Center for Muslim–Christian Understanding in the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, created to build stronger bridges of understanding between the Muslim world and the West, as well as between Islam and Christianity. We achieve this understanding by training the next generation of global leaders and also serve as a think-tank for the international exchange of ideas and scholars. I and some other colleagues serve as consultants to governments and religious leaders, policymakers, universities, corporate executives, and members of the media.

RSN: What is your greatest joy in teaching?

Esposito: I have spent much of my career teaching undergraduates and have always loved it. When I began in 1966 — although I had a 4–4 teaching load — I hated when the semester was over and I could not wait for the return to classes. Since coming to Georgetown University, I do teach graduate students and serve on dissertation committees, but still prefer undergraduate students. A favorite course is Georgetown University's first-year seminar that offers the opportunity of working with bright, talented students, turning them on to the course content, and using the course as a vehicle to improve critical thinking and writing skills.

RSN: What are your goals as the Academy's President in 2013?

Esposito: I intend to support and enhance the AAR's leadership and visibility in the public square. As I noted in my candidate statement for election, the AAR is positioned to respond with its unique resources to define and explain the critical role(s) of religion in the twenty-first century. Presidents, members of Congress, and professionals appeal to religion on the one hand, but on the other hand they find that they cannot escape religion as an ongoing political

issue in elections, Supreme Court appointments, or in international affairs.

We in the AAR are in a unique position as specialists in religion. We have an increasingly important opportunity to share our scholarship and experience with policy-makers, media, and our fellow citizens and to foster a better understanding of current events and encourage more informed decisions at this critical time in our history.

The Public Understanding of Religion Committee has created a strong foundation for the expansion of programs and debates at our Annual Meetings and, even more importantly, provide outreach to the media, government, and the public.

Despite the growing role of religion in politics and society, faculty across the country have been under siege from administrators who do not appreciate the significance of the humanities and the critical future role of our discipline. Citing budgetary problems, they are attempting to shut down religion departments or terminate nontenured faculty. The AAR has mobilized quickly and effectively to respond to and assist in reversing many of these decisions. We must now determine ways to reach out and “educate” many academic administrators and federal and state legislators regarding the importance of what we do. We can do this in the following ways:

Program in Mentoring and Dissemination of Knowledge

As younger members compete to get jobs in a tight market and to publish in an often-glutted arena, an AAR advisory committee of experienced published scholars could be available to mentor and provide invaluable assistance in getting the writing of young scholars to editors and help to obtain timely reviews from major publishing houses.

Development/Fundraising

In a tight economy and job market, the AAR risks losing members and/or participants at the Annual Meeting. Graduate students, adjuncts, and full-time faculty whose department funding has dried up need financial assistance. We cannot rely on the generosity and gifts from our members. We need to explore an aggressive fundraising initiative. The AAR’s reputation and

some members no doubt have connections and contacts with potential donors. While I know from personal experience fundraising is extraordinarily difficult, I also know from experience that it can be done.

International Connections and Projects

The international dimension of our work needs to be strengthened and expanded. In recent years, the AAR and the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) have developed a relationship that now needs to be strengthened through more formal ties and increased cooperation and participation in each other's conferences. The International Connections Committee is also addressing international/global issues and greater participation of scholars, representing non-North American countries and universities. Here, as one AAR board member reminded us, it will be important to provide translation services to enable and attract foreign scholars to present at our Annual Meetings.

Finally, as you will be informed in the near future, the new Board of Directors at its first 2013 Board meeting in February is moving decisively through the AAR–SBL Joint Task Force on Labor Policy to address the development of a labor policy for hotel contracts that best serves our membership and is responsive to the dignity of hotel workers, as well as development of a SRI policy, code of conduct, and a planning committee for strategic planning and other initiatives.

I am not naïve regarding this list of initiatives. For certain, some will take longer than others to implement. But I believe all are important as we build on the strengths of the AAR and therefore enable this important association to more effectively respond to the realities and possibilities of the twenty-first century.