

I'd like to learn more about Islam. Can you recommend some good books?

My favorite introductory book on Islam is Seyyed Nasr's *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization* (HarperCollins, 2003). Several factors make Nasr's book stand out.

First, Nasr is a Muslim, so in his book, you hear an authentic Muslim voice explaining Islam "from the inside," in contrast to most introductory books about Islam, which are written by non-Muslims. Some of them do a creditable job, but I prefer a Muslim presenting his own tradition "from the heart."

Also, while Nasr was born and raised in Iran, he has lived in the West for many years, studying at M.I.T. and Harvard. He knows Western (and Christian) history and intellectual history and also how to speak to Westerners. He "bridges the gap"

between the two cultures.

Nasr also comes out of the Shi'a and Sufi (Islamic mysticism) traditions, so his presentation of Islam is more attractive to Westerners than it might be if he came from some other strains within Islam. Both movements tend to be more broad-minded and inclusive than Sunni orthodoxy, the majority tradition in Islam. Because the Shi'as and Sufis are minorities rejected by the Sunnis (some of whom deny they are even Muslims), they conceive of Islam as containing diversity of thought and practice (though united in essentials). Sunnis tend to see Islam as monolithic (without diversity) and equal to Sunni orthodoxy. This means that most books written by Sunnis strike Westerners as rigid and therefore not attractive. The

THE REV.
WILLIAM G.
GARTIG



and away from godless secularism and skepticism. The Islamic world is in a better state spiritually because most people there have retained a God-centered worldview.

Of introductory books on Islam written by non-Muslims, John Esposito's *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford, 1998) stands out for its

approach of Nasr's book strikes one as fundamentally respectful of Judaism and Christianity and of the West in general. Nasr's hope for the West is that there will be a return to Christianity and Judaism

detailed treatment of religious/political movements in the Islamic world over the past 200 years.

The unparalleled reference work for the Islamic world since 1789 is *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (4 volumes, 1995, \$177). Slightly less expensive is the *Islamic Desk Reference* (Brill, 1994, list price \$106). It contains 5,000 succinct entries.

I hope these recommendations will give a place to start learning about this important religion (second only to Christianity in size), which is closely related to Christianity and Judaism.

The Rev. William G. Gartig will answer your questions about the Bible, Episcopal life and other religious subjects. Send questions to 2146 Cameron Ave. Apt. 5, Cincinnati, OH 45212-3631 or at gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com.