In both North America and Europe, the events of September eleventh precipitated a sharp rise in the attention given to Islam and Muslim peoples. This is both bad and good news. The bad news is that some of this attention has taken the form of a vengeful backlash of prejudice and hatred aimed at victimizing innocent Muslim men, women, and children, especially those living in the U.S. Acts of vandalism, personal assault, and gross violations of civil rights are just three of the principal forms of indignity and injustice suffered by the U.S. Muslim community in the wake of the tragic attacks. The good news, however, is that there are many other people interested in pursuing education and dialogue rather than revenge. In fact, it appears that a great number of the efforts to build bridges with the Muslim community have been led by those involved in inter-religious dialogue, or other related areas of pastoral ministry. Like the vast majority of people in the U.S., however, the surge of interest in Islam has taken most of these pastoral ministers by surprise. Although there is generally great enthusiasm for helping to enrich the church's understanding of Islam and the Muslims, many of those who are asked to take leadership roles in this process feel relatively ill-informed. Many are also aware that, while the marketplace is flooded with books on Islam and related topics, they are not all of equal quality, and some are likely to be better suited for certain purposes than others.

Where to Begin?

For those with little to no knowledge about Islam, Jamal Elias's *Islam* in the Religions of the World Series, Ninian Smart, ed. (Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998) makes for an excellent beginning. This book strikes just the right balance between a highly intelligent, yet concise and readable treatment of a vast and complex subject. It begins inductively with a chapter on two of the most striking features of Islam in an "everyday" context: the role of the Qur'an, and the figure of Muhammad. Only after acclimating the reader with a few valuable snapshots of Islam as a lived reality, does the book continue with a summary of historical origins followed by

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brief but insightful examinations of theology, law, mysticism, belief, ritual (including life-cycle rites), modern political and intellectual trends, and a reflective glance towards the future. A less thematic and more historical alternative, or complement, to Elias is Karen Armstrong's *Islam: A Short History* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000). Rather than a synthesis of Islam as a religious tradition, this book presents a sweeping but thoughtful panorama of the history of Islamic civilization from the lifetime of the Prophet to the present. It covers the period of formative cultural and political institutions, looks at the Crusader episode and the imperial era of the Safavids, Moghuls, and the Ottomans, and closes with an analysis of how this great civilization is both assimilating and being assimilated into "modernity."

**The Qur'an**

No doubt due to their perception of its unrivaled centrality in Muslim piety, many non-Muslims express an interest in reading the Qur'an as a means of becoming more familiar with Muslim belief and praxis. As any historian of religion knows, an unmediated encounter with the scripture of almost any religious tradition by someone who is an outsider to that tradition is probably as doomed to produce frustration, confusion, and ultimate failure, as it is well-intentioned. The reason for this is that religious traditions bring to bear on their sacred texts a rich hermeneutical context replete with implicit and explicit cues for interpreting these texts and demonstrating their foundational status for their respective communities of faith. Islam and the Qur'an are certainly no exception. In fact, one could argue that the critically important oral/aural dimension of the Qur'an as "recitation" makes this all the more the case when it comes to Islam and its holy book. For this reason, it is critical to introduce oneself to the Qur'an, either through the good graces of an educated Muslim friend who can expose you to liturgical recitation and interpretation, or by reading at least one, if not both of the following two works. The first is Michael Cook's superb *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and the second is Michael Sells's innovative *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1999).

Cook's work is strictly an introduction and includes no substantial translation of the Qur'an. As an introduction, however, it is first rate. One of the most eminent Western scholars of early and medieval Islam, Cook deftly summarizes and effectively communicates, in this marvelous little book, the core of his wide-ranging knowledge of the history and nature of the text—both from the perspective of the believer as well as that of a source-critical exegete. Sells also provides his reader with an introduction to the history and nature of the Qur'anic corpus, but unlike Cook he also includes an excellent translation of, and scholarly commentary on, six early and relatively short chapters of the Qur'an. The most significant contribution Sells makes, however, is what follows the translations: an analysis of the rich interplay between the sound and meaning of the recited text—an interplay which accounts for so much of the captivating power of the Qur'an in Muslim experience. Sells makes such an analysis possible by including a CD with the book which allows the reader to become an actual hearer and thus able to appreciate the Qur'an in its most complete modality as chanted word.

**Threats and Clashes**

Perhaps the two books that have made the most significant contributions to fram-

Ever since the Iranian revolution of the late seventies and the infamous “hostage crisis” that lasted over four hundred days, and was at least partly responsible for Jimmy Carter’s loss of a second term to Ronald Reagan, Islamic “fundamentalist” movements had begun to be perceived as a serious “threat” to U.S. foreign interests. Over the ensuing decade, a scholarly debate over these movements began to take shape. On one side of this debate were those who argued that intensified conflict between the West and a monolithically radical trend in Islamic politics was inevitable. On the other side were those who began to ask whether the very perception of Islamic political movements as monolithically anti-Western force that will not be dissuaded from all-out violent conflict.

It was in 1992 that John Esposito, now university professor at Georgetown and director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, first published *The Islamic Threat*. In this book Esposito offers an unusually fresh perspective on the role of what he prefers to refer to as “Islamic revival” or “reform” movements, using the terminology of the movements themselves rather than the Western and ideologically loaded “fundamentalism.” In part, *The Islamic Threat* was a rejoinder to Lewis and his side of the debate over political Islam. To a larger degree, however, it was the result of extensive research and publication on the subject which included a groundbreaking English language anthology of the writings of modern Muslim political thinkers entitled *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, edited along with John Donohue (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), and an illuminating collection of essays by contemporary historians and Muslim political theorists and activists entitled, *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). The carefully nuanced thesis of *The Islamic Threat* is that contemporary Islamic political movements are anything but monolithic. Instead they exist on a broad continuum, each profoundly conditioned by the political, cultural, and socio-economic circumstances of their context. Indeed it is precisely because of this inescapable reality, Esposito argues, that the Pan-Islamic vision of certain of these movements is as much a myth as the attempt by Lewis and others to paint them as a monolithic threat to the West.

In 1993 another rhetorically powerful and articulate response came from Lewis’s side of the debate. Harvard University’s Samuel P. Huntington published a seminal article in the journal *Foreign Affairs* (Sum-
mer 1993) entitled, “The Clash of Civilizations.” The 1998 book of the same title is a revised and expanded version of the thesis of this article. Employing the metaphor of plate tectonics, Huntington speaks of the civilizational “fault lines” of the post-Cold War world. No longer, Huntington argues, will the world be divided into blocs dominated by superpowers, but rather geopolitical allegiances will coalesce along the lines of civilizational affinities. According to Huntington, the greatest challenges to Western civilization (which includes mainly Europe, the U.S., and Canada), will be posed by what he identifies as the Islamic and Confucian civilizations. It is clear, however, that of the two, Huntington believes that Islamic civilization—with its alleged opposition to such ideals as individualism, gender equality, democracy, and the separation of church and state—poses the greatest threat to the West.

In addition to the issue as to whether the Huntington thesis gives too insignificant a role to the nation state, the other key question raised by this controversial thesis is whether this is the only model for looking at the relationship between “civilizations.” How plausible are models that emphasize the potential for meaningful civilizational interaction alongside of, or even over and above, civilizational “clash”?

In the second edition of The Islamic Threat (1995), Esposito again emphasizes the need to see the full spectrum of political Islam, from moderate to extremist, from revolutionary to evolutionary, and to adjust Western foreign policy accordingly. “This approach,” Esposito maintains, “lessens the risk of creating self-fulfilling prophecies that augur the battle of the West against a radical Islam or a clash of civilizations” (253). In light of September eleventh, the question is: have we reached the point of no return in the unfolding of the Huntington prediction, or is there still time to take Esposito’s advice and begin to turn the tide for a brighter future?

Another important contribution to this debate is Bassam Tibi’s The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). It is a scholarly yet impassioned critique of radical Islamic politics by a Muslim who nearly predicts—three years in advance—the current post-September eleventh global “disorder,” and who advocates what he calls a “genuine, more political than interdenomina
tional Islamic-Christian-Jewish dialogue as the route to peace in the new century and new millennium” (19). Of all the more recent works on Islamic political movements and the West, it is Tibi’s which lends the strongest, most innovative, and most urgent validation of inter-religious dialogue as a political solution to the current global crisis. For this reason alone it should be of great interest to those who have already invested, or who are considering investing, a good deal of time, energy, and other resources into the ministry of dialogue.

The Role of Dialogue

And finally, on the subject of the history of Christian-Muslim relations, Hugh Goddard has recently published an extremely competent survey entitled simply, A History of Muslim-Christian Relations (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000). Goddard begins with a look at Christianity before the rise of Islam, and in particular Christian thinking about other religious traditions in the late antique Near East. After a section on Muhammad’s possible dealings with Christians and the Qur’anic view of Christians, Goddard then proceeds to di
de his chronological approach into distinct periods including the first encounters of a waxing imperial Islam with the culture of a waning Christendom, medieval
points of confrontation and interaction (including the crusades and the transmission of Hellenistic philosophy from Islamic to western Christian civilization), and the rise of western colonialism and imperialism. Perhaps the most interesting section of Goddard’s treatment are his last two chapters where he assesses the contributions of important twentieth-century Christian and Muslim scholars, and he speculates on trajectories for the future of the Christian-Muslim dialogue movement. Goddard’s tone is at once hopeful and realistic—a wise combination for anyone who embarks on an inter-religious pilgrimage of any kind.

**Conclusion**

Of course, this brief review represents an infinitesimal sampling of some of the better texts on various aspects of Islam which may be of interest to those who find themselves wanting to be better equipped for Christian-Muslim dialogue. Being well-prepared can only be advantageous in a context such as the one in which we find ourselves—a context marked by the potential for both enormous progress as well as enormous setbacks. *In sha’a Allah* (God willing), may those of us who choose to be involved in the dialogue be granted the courage to work toward the former and the patience to endure the latter.