

Book reviews

Reviewer [George Simons](#), SIETAR member

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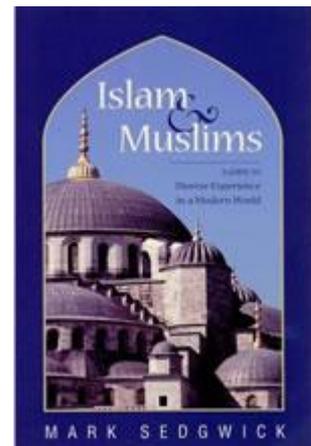
Author Mark Sedgwick

Title Islam and Muslims:
A Guide to Diverse Experience in a
Modern World

Publisher [Intercultural Press](#)

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This easy-to-read presentation of Islam and Muslims by Mark Sedgwick could just as well have been titled, “An introduction to the people next door.” The book is a matter-of-fact approach to Muslims, their culture, their thinking and their habits with much guidance but little intrusion by the author. It presents the diversity of Muslims from the most devout to the most secular, in geographical contexts worldwide with the excursions into the background needed to know how certain Muslim beliefs, behaviors and practices came about. Understanding is enhanced by copious points of contact with the Western reader’s own cultural history and heritage.

What I found most overwhelming in the larger part of the book was a sense of a vast array of people and peoples who were in fact not much different from my own. These are my neighbors, both present and past. Recognition of similarity need not be a denial of difference. Much of the dynamics, many of the attitudes and practices of Muslims can be found today among those of us who are not Muslim, but who bear another religion or none at all.

From a belief and values perspective, it was easy to recognize and sympathize with many of the attitudes and behaviors of Muslims described in the book. In many cases they parallel what was normal in the environments pre-Vatican II Catholicism and pre-ecumenical Protestantism in which I grew up. One of the advantages of aging is that one has a memory that exceeds the trends, fashions and cycles of thinking that have occurred in one’s lifetime, the waxing and waning of both skirt lines and fundamentalisms. We remember where we came from and the places we have passed through. We also remember the need to defend who we were and to carry our heritage with us in hostile environments. Attitudes about modesty, piety, gender roles, charity and responsibility to one’s family were and are not unique to Islam, though forms of expression may differ widely. The author’s simple but comprehensive descriptions allow us to have these insights.

Sedgwick is also excellent at distinguishing what belongs to Islam religiously and historically from conditions and events which are due to economic, educational and political factors that are often confused with our assessment of Muslims and of Islam. That the poor and uneducated, legion in many parts of the Muslim world should have certain beliefs and habits that others and even they themselves see as part of religion is not surprising nor should we think of it as peculiar to Islam.

Then, what is the problem? Having connected with “the people next door” and become understanding at least, if not accepting of their attitudes and behaviors, we need to face, as Sedgwick does in his final chapters, the political drive of Islamism and the concept of the clash of civilizations. He reminds us that the need for political and economic change in much of the Islamic world is both enormous and pressing in the everyday lives of Muslims, and that religion is the only available constellating force for renewal or revolution.

The author reminds us of the history that underlies the Islamist present. The colonialism, interference and exploitation of Western governments and enterprises, both past and present make them an inevitable target in the efforts for change. US Americans may wonder why they are targeted. Henry Ford may have claimed that “history is bunk” but in fact history is bunkers, guns and exploitation. Islam and Muslims makes it clear that through our alliances with both former colonial powers, unpopular indigenous rulers and the state of Israel, now capped by our military engagement and threats the USA has become the embodiment of the devil of colonialism and the new crusaders. There is little reason in present circumstances for popular Muslim sentiment to favor the USA or those allied with it despite the need for development, technology, and other potentially helpful Western resources.

The prognosis for political stability in most areas of the Muslim world is certainly in the short term not very hopeful. There is no reason to expect a lessening of either internal tension and violence or its spillover to the rest of the world. While the “clash of civilizations” may become a self-fulfilling prophesy because of our propensity for dualist thinking and policies of isolation, Sedgwick clearly identifies its roots elsewhere. The ongoing animosity and violence are the result of festering socioeconomic problems that become political agendas which in turn exploit religious identity to secure and maintain power. While socio-economic problems can be addressed, endless violence and conflict result when the issues have been raised to the intractable level of religious and ethnic identity.

In reviewing this book, I claim no special critical knowledge of Islam. Having avidly devoured Philip Hitti’s 1937 *History of the Arabs* (the 10th edition is still a must in the field) in high school under the tutelage of a prof who made history come alive, I received at least a good outline of Islam’s historical and cultural development along with an abiding curiosity. I sensed myself enriched by Sedgwick’s far reaching comprehension of the cultures and peoples of Islam, but also expect that readers who are approaching Muslims and Islam for the first time will find the book user-friendly as well as at least in some small degree enlightening and reassuring given the current frantic political climate whose chief product seems to be the generation of fear about each other.

The book is particularly good at describing the various communities, divisions and sects found in Islam both past and present. Each chapter ends with a brief summary highlighting the key issues discussed. Sedgwick speaks personally as well as objectively and makes it clear when he is doing so. One senses that the book is like a parlor conversation with an expert, both knowledgeable and personable.

Though its lucid text leaves little to be researched, *Islam and Muslims* is furnished with a convenient glossary and a set of charts that allow the reader to get a sense of the size of Muslim populations by regions of the world. It ends with a bibliography which is conveniently shaped into a set of recommended readings by chapter.