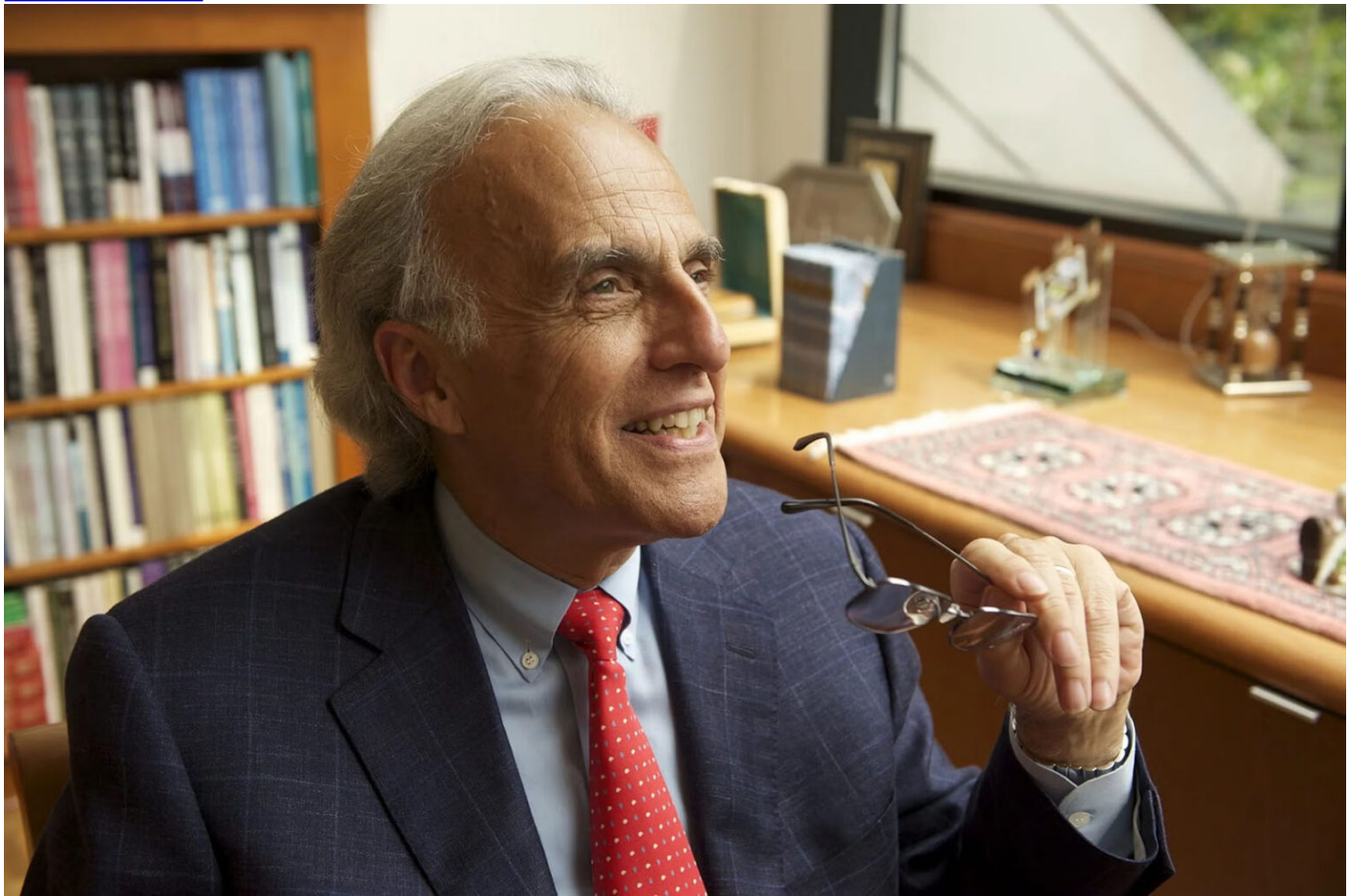


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John Esposito, Islamic studies scholar, dies at 86. (Courtesy of Georgetown University)

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Public opinion of Islam has zigzagged dramatically over the past 50 years between those who have characterized it as a violent faith fundamentally opposed to Western values and those who have sought to understand Islam's plurality, diversity and complexity as practiced in the lives of Muslims.

Among the latter was John Esposito, one of the foremost non-Muslim scholars of Islam, who died July 15 at the age of 86 following complications from heart surgery. Esposito, who was professor emeritus of religion, international affairs and Islamic studies at Georgetown University, was distinguished for his careful scholarship that sought to correct Western misconceptions about Islam.

In as many as 55 books and a lifetime of teaching, he challenged the "Clash of Civilizations" theory of Islam as proposed by scholars Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis. Esposito sought to build bridges between Westerners and Muslims, becoming a go-to source for sensitive and nuanced portrayals of Islam among journalists, diplomats, foreign policy advisers and scholars.

"He had a humanizing factor in addition to his academic knowledge, and then he spent time living among Muslims," said Dalia Mogahed, a scholar at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding who co-authored a book with Esposito. "So, he had an academic and very accurate understanding of Islam, and he also had the experience of being among the believers."

Although begun years earlier, Esposito's scholarship carried even more weight in the years after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, when public understanding of Islam was urgently needed. He had already founded the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal [Center](#) for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown's Walsh School of Foreign Service. In 2015, seeing there was no respite from demonizations of Islam by far-right political activists, he also founded the [Bridge Initiative](#) as a resource for documenting anti-Muslim prejudice and its impact on public policy, media and civil society.

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"Muslims around the world felt like he got it right," said Hadia Mubarak, associate professor of religion at Queens University in Charlotte, North Carolina, who worked as a researcher for Esposito while she was completing her Ph.D. degree at Georgetown. "He was able to accurately portray Muslims in America and around the world as well in a very authentic way."

Esposito was born in Brooklyn in 1940 to an Italian Catholic family. He later spent 10 years in a Capuchin Franciscan monastery. Even after he gave up on his desire to be a friar in the Catholic order, he wanted to pursue a Ph.D. in Catholic theology.

He chose Temple University in Philadelphia, which required him to spend a year studying world religions. He was initially drawn to Buddhism and Hinduism and said he only reluctantly took a class on Islam. His professor, Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, a prominent Palestinian American Muslim scholar, then recommended that Esposito go to Lebanon to study Arabic, which he did. His trajectory was set.

Still, in those days, there were few religion departments at major universities and even fewer specializations in the study of Islam.

"When I finished my degree, there were no jobs in Islamic studies," Esposito said in a [video](#) in which he reflected on his life. "I applied to many universities for different jobs, and the only job that was available was a job in teaching world religions."

He settled into a job teaching at the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts. No U.S. publisher was interested in publishing his papers or book proposals on Islam, and he anticipated a quiet and unassuming academic life.

All that changed with the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which overthrew the Iranian monarchy and installed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as its supreme leader. As Esposito often liked to [say](#), "I owe my career, and my first Lexus, to the Iranian Revolution."

Esposito was one of the first American scholars allowed to go to Iran and interview the ayatollah and his family. He was also called on to educate U.S. diplomats and foreign policy experts at the State Department, who, he said, were ill prepared to understand the resurgence of Islam.

"Consultations in Washington during the hostage crisis underscored the degree of ignorance of Islam in general, and specifically of Iranian Shiism in particular," he said.

The Iranian Revolution almost instantly launched Esposito's prodigious book-writing career.

Among his best-known works were "Islam: The Straight Path," "The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?" "What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam," "The Future of Islam" and "Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think," the book he co-wrote with Mogahed based on a multiyear research study by Gallup.

He also served as editor-in-chief of several landmark reference works, including "The Oxford Dictionary of Islam," "The Oxford History of Islam" and "The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World."

In his work, Esposito was powerfully influenced by Desmond Tutu, the late South African Anglican bishop and theologian. His email signature included the famous Tutu phrase, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

"John reminded me a lot of Desmond Tutu in that they're both very spiritually sourced justice warriors," said Mogahed. "They were both courageous, advocated on the part of the oppressed and came at it from a place of deep spiritual devotion."

A celebration of his life will take place Friday from 6:00-9:00 p.m. at the Donohue Funeral Home, 3300 West Chester Pike, Newtown Square, Pennsylvania. A Funeral Mass will take place at 10:30 a.m. Saturday at St. Anastasia Church, 3301 West Chester Pike, Newtown Square, Pennsylvania. It will be [livestreamed](#).