

Orientalist John L, Esposito views on the Quran: A Critical Analysis in the Light of Islam: The Straight Path

Muhammad Iqbal Haider
Ph.D Islamic Culture Scholar, University of Sindh.
Email: muhammadhaiderimam@gmail.com

Dr. Hafiz Mukhtiar Ahmed Kandhro
Assistant Professor, Department of Comparative Religion and Islamic Culture,
University of Sindh.
Email: mukhtiar.kandhro@usindh.edu.pk

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Abstract

Orientalists have always raised objections to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Holy Quran. Their aim is to create doubts among Muslims about the Quran and the Sirah (biography of the Prophet) by raising objections. Their goal is that if doubts are created in the Quran, it will be easy to undermine the faith of Muslims. However, among Orientalists, there are some scholars and intellectuals who have always acknowledged the Quran and the Sirah. One such scholar is John L. Esposito, a Catholic Christian scholar, who has acknowledged the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a prophet and the Quran as the word of God. In his book "Islam: The Straight Path", John L. Esposito writes that the Quran and the revelation are from God and are not the words of a human being. But some Orientalists like William Muir and David Hume have considered the Quran to be a human composition.

Keywords: Orientalist, Quran, Revelation, Prophet, Islam

Introduction:

Muslims believe that the Quran is the word of God and it has been preserved in its original form as it was revealed, because God himself has taken the responsibility of its protection. "انا نحن نزلنا الذكر وانا له لحافظون" The Quran states: "Indeed, it is We who sent down the Reminder, and indeed, We will be its guardian"(1). Orientalists have expressed various doubts about the divine nature, revelation, and compilation of the Quran. However, the opinion of the orientalist John L. Esposito regarding the Quran will be critically examined.

1. The revelation of the Quran:

John L. Esposito quotes from the Quran itself regarding the revelation of the Quran. For Muslims, God's revelation was not only given to Jews and Christians and then Muslims but according to the Quran, given universally to all peoples: "For every community, there is a messenger" ولكل امة رسول" and "we sent messengers before you; among them are those we

have told you of, and those about whom we have not told you” وما كان لرسول ان ياتي بآية الا باذن الله. The Quran is the final and complete, eternal, uncreated, literal word of God, and revealed one final time to the Prophet Muhammad as a guide for humankind. (٣)

John L. Esposito himself has stated that the Quran is revealed from God and is not a human creation.

2.Sovereignty of God:

John L. Esposito writes in his book that God's sovereignty is universal and His presence is evident in rise and fall, nature, and victory and defeat.

Islam teaches that God's revelation has occurred in several forms: in nature, history, and scripture. God's existence can be known through creation; nature contains pointers or "signs" of God, its creator and sustainer. (٤) قل اللهم ملك الملك تؤتي الملك من تشاء وتنزع الملك ممن تشاء. The history of the rise and fall of nations, victory and defeat, provides clear signs and lessons of God's sovereignty and intervention in history. (٥) God's presence is recognized through His power and signs.

3.The Quran and Guidance:

The Quran does not claim to bring a new message, but rather it was revealed to correct the message brought by previous prophets, which had been altered by their followers after they passed away. John L. Esposito includes a Quranic verse to clarify the relationship between the Quran and previous scriptures.

After the falsification of the revelation given to the Jews and the Christians, Muslims believe that God in his mercy sent down His word one final time. The Quran does not abrogate or nullify, but rather corrects, the version of scripture preserved by the Jewish and Christian communities: "People of the Book, now there has come to you Our messenger making clear to you many things you have been concealing of the Book, and effacing many things". يهدي به. (٦) The Quran corrects the scriptures that had been distorted by Christians and Jews, and guides them from misguidance to the right path.

4.The Quran as the Word of God:

While Muslims believe the Quran is the word of God, non-Muslims have raised objections. However, John L. Esposito writes about the Quran being the word of God:

Because Muslims believe that the Quran's Arabic Language and Character are revealed. بلسان. (٧) Because the Quran is God's book, the text of the Quran, like its author, is regarded as perfect, eternal, and unchangeable. This belief is the basis for the doctrine of the miracle of inimitability of the Quran, which asserts that the ideas, language, and style of the Quran cannot be reproduced. The Quran proclaims that even the combined efforts of human beings and Jinns could not produce a comparable text. (٨) The Quran is not a creation of humans or jinn, and it has challenged them to produce something similar - a challenge that remains unmet to this day.

5. The Abrahamic Heritage of Muslims, Jews, and Christians:

Muslims trace their lineage back to Abraham, making Jews, Christians, and Muslims not only "People of the Book" but also descendants of Abraham - albeit from different branches. Jews and Christians are descended from Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah, while Muslims are descended from Ishmael, Abraham's first son, born to Hagar.

Muslims trace their heritage back to Ibrahim. Thus, Jews, Christians, and Muslims are not only "People of the Book", but also Children of Ibrahim. However, they belong to different branches of the same family. Where as Jews and Christians are descendent of Ibrahim and his wife Sarah through their son Isaac, Muslims trace their lineage back to Ismail, Ibrahim's first-born son by his Egyptian bondswoman, Hagar.⁽⁹⁾

John L. Esposito also notes in his book that Jews and Christians are descended from Isaac, while Muslims are descended from Ishmael, Abraham's first son, born to Hagar. This shared Abrahamic heritage is why there's an effort today to bridge Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

6. The Quran is Revelation, and the Prophet is the Medium:

Islam's concept of revelation (wahy) attributes the message and words to an external source, God. Muhammad is merely a medium, not the author or editor, but God's messenger. The traditional teachings emphasize the Prophet's illiteracy, receiving revelation through Angel Gabriel, and even the arrangement of Quranic chapters support the belief that the Quran is God's literal word with no input from Muhammad.

John L. Esposito also notes this in his book *Islam: The Straight Path*. Islam's doctrine of revelation also contrasts with that of modern biblical criticism. The form and the content, as well as the message and the actual words, of revelation are attribute to an external source, God. Muhammad is merely an instrument or a conduit. He is neither author nor editor of the Quran, but God's intermediary. ⁽¹⁰⁾

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said that apart from the Quran, whatever he does or says is purely based on revelation, and he doesn't speak of his own accord. The Quran also emphasizes this in Surah Al-Qamar, where Allah says *وم ينطق عن الهوى ان هو الا وحى يوحى* ⁽¹¹⁾

7. Compilation of the Quran:

The Quran was initially preserved in both oral and written form during the Prophet's lifetime. Muslims believe it was compiled in the exact order it was revealed. John L. Esposito also notes this in his book.

The Quran was initially preserved in oral and written form during the lifetime of the Prophet. The entire text of the Quran was finally collected in an official, authorized version during the ruler of third caliph, Uthman bin Affan. The Quran was collected, not edited or organized thematically. However, many Muslims believe that the ordering of the chapters and verses was itself divinely inspired. ⁽¹²⁾ During the caliphate of Uthman, the Quran was compiled into a single manuscript, but no changes were made to its order or chapter divisions.

8. Tawhid and Jews & Christians:

Muslims believe that after the prophets' passing, external, non-biblical beliefs crept in, altering the original revelation. The true concept of monotheism was lost among Jews and Christians, who claimed closeness to God. The Quran addresses this mindset, as noted by John L. Esposito Muslims believe that after the deaths of the prophets, extraneous, non-biblical beliefs infiltrated the texts and thus altered and distorted the original, pure revelation. The Jews, and later the Christians, are portrayed as having distorted their mission to witness into a doctrine of their divine election as a chosen people. (١٣)

And the Jews and Christians say, "We are the sons of God, and His beloved ones." Say: "Why then does He chastise you for your sins? No; you are mortals, of His creating; He forgives whom He will, and He chastises whom He will" -

"وقالت اليهود والنصرى نحن ابناؤ الله واحباؤه قل فلم يعذبكم بذنوبكم بل انتم بشر ممن خلق يغفر لمن يشاء ويعذب من يشاء والله ملك السموات والارض وما بينهما واليه المصير" - (١٣)

John L. Esposito notes that the Quran reveals the reality of Jews' and Christians' beliefs about monotheism, despite their own views on the Quran's revelation, even though he's a Christian scholar himself.

9. Prophets and Messengers:

In Islam, there's a distinction between prophets (nabi) and messengers (rasul). Both receive divine inspiration, but messengers are given a written message for a community, and their success is guaranteed by God. All messengers are prophets, but not all prophets are messengers. The term "prophet" is used more broadly in Islam than in Jewish or Christian traditions, as noted by John L. Esposito.

However, messengers are given a message for a community in a book form and, unlike prophets, are assured success by God. Where as all messengers are prophet, all prophet are not messengers. The word "Prophet" is applied for more inclusively in Islam than in the Judeo- Christians traditions. It is applied to Abraham, Noah, Joseph, and John the Baptist as well as nonbiblical prophets of Arabia like Hud and Salih. "Messenger" is limited to men like Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Who are both Prophets and messengers. (١٥)

This belief, as described by John L. Esposito, shows similarities between Islamic and Judeo-Christian traditions regarding prophets and messengers.

10. Abraham's Religion:

All great monotheistic prophets are considered true Muslims. Thus, Abraham wasn't Jewish or Christian, but a follower of the true religion. John L. Esposito notes this in Islam: The Straight Path.

The term "Muslim" means "one who submits" or surrender to God; it includes everyone who follows His guidance and performs His will. All the great monotheistic prophets are regarded as true Muslims. Thus, Abraham is not a Jew or a Christian but a follower of the true religion, one who submitted to God. من كان ابراهيم يهوديا ولا نصرانيا ولكن كان حنيفا مسلما وما كان من

المشركين (١٦)

John L. Esposito explicitly states, referencing the Quran, that Abraham's religion wasn't Judaism or Christianity, but he was a true Muslim monotheist.

11. God and Human:

Among all creations, humans have a unique relationship with God, as after creating Adam, God breathed His spirit into him. (١٤) فاذا سوّيته ونفخت فيه من روحي فقعوا له سجدين-

Furthermore, the Quran declares that God created humans in "the best of molds" to be His representatives on earth. John L. Esposito writes about this in his book *Islam: The Straight Path*. (١٨) لقد خلقنا الانسان في احسن تقويم.

Of all creation, man enjoys a unique relationship with God, for after creating Adam, God breathed into him His Spirit. Moreover, the Quran declares that God created human beings in "the best of molds or stature" to be His representatives on earth. (١٩)

God honored humans so much that He had angels prostrate to them, and those who refused became Satan. Now, humans are tasked with pleasing God through worship on earth.

12. Taqwa:

God-consciousness (تقوى) is what makes one noble in God's sight – the most pious among you. (٢٠) ان اكرمكم عند الله اتقكم-

John L. Esposito notes that taqwa (God-consciousness) is a measure of a person's or community's virtues, as commanded by God in the Quran:

What God commands, and what His awesome character engenders, is fear of God (taqwa): "The most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous or God fearing of you. (٢١)

13. Quran's Socio-Economic Reforms:

The Quran's reforms are notable, focusing on the poor, vulnerable, widows, women, and orphans. (٢٢) ان الذين ياكلون اموال اليتيمى ظلما انما ياكلون في بطونهم نارا وسيصلون سعيرا. Exploitation of slaves is strongly condemned. John L. Esposito discusses Islam's directives to address social issues, highlighting its emphasis on justice and compassion.

False contracts, bribery, abuse of women, hoarding of wealth to the exclusion of its subordination to higher ends, and usury are denounced. The Quran demands that Muslims pursue a path of social justice, rooted in the recognition that the earth belongs ultimately to God and that human beings are its caretakers. In holy Quran: "The alms (zakat) are for the poor and needy, those who work to collect them, those whose hearts are to be reconciled, the ransoming of slaves and debtors, and for the cause of God, and for travelers." (٢٣)

John L. Esposito notes that Islam has made society more functional through its economic and social reforms.

14. Revelation and Sources of the Quran:

The Quran's source is divine revelation (wahy) from God, conveyed through Gabriel, who brought revelations to other prophets too. John L. Esposito also discusses this in his book. They are transmitters of God's message, communicating divine revelation to the prophets. Thus, Gabriel (Jibril) brought down the Quran from heaven to Muhammad. (٢٤)

15. Invocation of Tasmiyah:

John L. Esposito says that starting each surah with Bismillah reminds believers repeatedly that God is compassionate and merciful.

John L. Esposito writes about this in his Book:

Opening the Quran to its initial chapter, one reads, "In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate" each of its chapter begins with this application, Keeping before the believer a reminder of the nature of the God of this revelation. The terms "merciful" and "compassionate" are intensive forms of the same root, Rahmat. (٢٥)

16. Religion of Islam:

Islam is one of the ancient religions. John L. Esposito writes in "Islam: The Straight Path":

Thus, Islam is not a new religion with a new scripture. Instead of being the youngest of the major monotheistic world religions, from a Muslim viewpoint it is the oldest. Islam represent the "original" as well as the final revelation of the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. (٢٦)

John L. Esposito notes that Islam is the primordial religion, tracing its lineage through prophets like Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Muslims believe these prophets were divinely appointed, with Muhammad being the final prophet

(٢٧) ما كان محمد اباحد من رجالكم ولكن رسول الله وخاتم النبيين -

17. Concept of Hereafter:

The idea of an afterlife is central to revealed religions. John L. Esposito describes this concept, highlighting its significance.

Each community will be judged by the standards brought by its prophets and Book. Humans and Jinn alike will stand before the throne of God. هذا كتبنا ينطق عليكم بالحق انا كنا نستنسخ ما كنتم

تعملون. فاما الذين امنوا وعملوا الصلحت فيدخلهم ربهم في رحمته ذلك هو الفوز المبين (٢٨) All are responsible for their own actions and will be judged according to the record found in the Book of Deeds. (٢٩)

This belief in the Hereafter motivates people to do good deeds in this world.

Conclusion

John L. Esposito, a Catholic scholar, presents Islam objectively, citing Quranic verses to affirm the Quran as divine revelation, not human creation. Esposito notes the same angel brought revelation to all prophets. He sees Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as Abrahamic faiths, united by belief in revelation. However, Muslims believe each new prophet abrogates previous scripture ☀️. Esposito's view suggests all these religions are divine paths to guidance. Esposito notes the Quran challenges humans and jinn to produce a similar surah, but none have succeeded. The Quran affirms previous scriptures, and Prophet Muhammad claimed to be Allah's messenger, not the author of the Quran. Esposito notes the Quran was preserved orally and in writing during Prophet Muhammad's time. He lists Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad as prophets, but Muslims believe Muhammad PBUH is the final prophet.

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