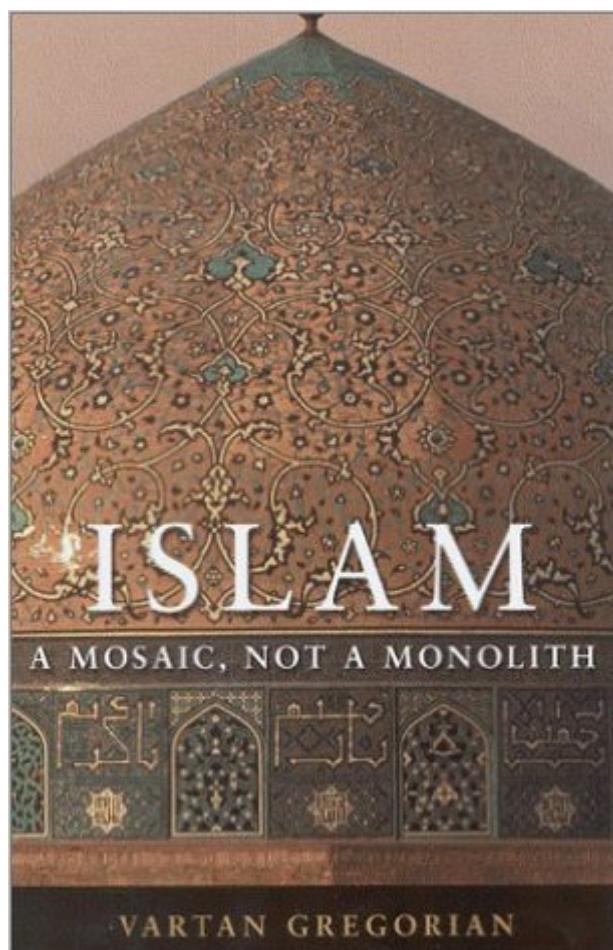


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Islam: A Mosaic, Not A Monolith



Synopsis

After World War II, leading western powers focused their attention on fighting the "Red Menace," Communism. Today, as terrorist activity is increasingly linked to militant Islamism, some politicians and scholars fear a "Green Menace," a Pan-Islamic totalitarian movement fueled by monolithic religious ideology. Such fears have no foundation in history, according to Vartan Gregorian. In this succinct, powerful survey of Islam, Gregorian focuses on Muslim diversity and division, portraying the faith and its people as a mosaic, not a monolith. The book begins with an accessible overview of Islam's tenets, institutions, evolution, and historical role. Gregorian traces its origins and fundamental principles, from Muhammad's call to faith nearly 1,400 years ago to the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, and the subsequent abolition of the Caliphate. He focuses particular attention on the intense struggle between modernists and traditionalists, interaction between religion and nationalism, and key developments that have caused bitter divisions among Muslim nations and states: the partitions of Palestine, the break up and Islamization of Pakistan, the 1978 revolution in Iran, and the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Today Islamist views range across the entire spectra of religious and political thought, and Islamism is anything but a unified movement. While religious extremists have attempted to form a confederacy of like-minded radicals in many countries, much of the Muslim population lives in relatively modern, secular states. Gregorian urges Westerners to distinguish between activist Islamist parties, which promote sometimes violently Islam as an ideology in a theocratic state, and Islamic parties, whose traditional members want their secular political systems to co-exist with the moral principles of their religion. Gregorian emphasizes the importance of religion in today's world and urges states, societies, and intellectuals to intervene in order to prevent Islam--as well as other religions--from becoming the political tool of various parties and states. He recommends continuing dialogues between modernist and traditionalist Muslims, as well as among the educated, secular elite and their clerical counterparts. He also urges U.S.-led efforts to engage and better understand the diversity of Muslim communities in the United States and the world. Lamenting widespread U.S. ignorance of the world's fastest-growing religion, Gregorian calls on "enlightened citizens" to promote international understanding, tolerance, and peace.

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Customer Reviews

"Huntington [Samuel P. Huntington, author of THE CLASH Of CIVILIZATIONS And The REMAKING Of The WORLD ORDER] and others who write about a clash of civilizations do not recognize that class, tribal, family, personal, ethnic, cultural, economic, and national interests have always defied a unity of purpose that transcends all these divisions. As shown above, instances when the Muslim world was a unified monolith have been extremely rare. Throughout Islamic history, the gravitational pull of regional, dynastic, and since the nineteenth century nationalist interests has consistently outweighed the spiritual affiliations of some idealized, transcendent, organic umma. If history is a guide, it shows that in Islam, as in most major religions, there is a broad gulf between the ideal of unity and the realities on the ground." (ISLAM: A MOSAIC, NOT A MONOLITH, pp. 110-111). The above paragraph provides the gist of Vartan Gregorian's excellent book, dispelling certain myths about both the Islamic world and Islamist extremism which are being promoted by some politicians, journalists, writers and religious leaders in the West. Gregorian shows that the idea of a totalitarian Pan-Islamic juggernaut determined to engulf the world and submit it to "sharia" law not only is unlikely it has no historical foundation. While the fears of Islamist extremism are naturally not unwarranted and should be taken seriously, Gregorian also wants us to keep in mind the intense struggles between modernity and traditionalism, as well as religion and nationality in the Muslim world. Indeed, except for relatively brief periods in history, the Umma (the Muslim community) has mostly existed in a world fragmented by rival dynasties and states, willing to ally themselves with outsiders against each other.

To educate myself on Islam, I have read a number of books in the past two years on Islam - ranging from those who trash Islam to those who defend it. Gregorian's book is a very good summary of the history and complexities of the issue of Islam and how it fits into today's world. It is adequate, but

light on the Sunni/Shiite divide, which is a critical to understanding the Middle East today. I debated whether this book should get 4 or 5 stars and decided on four because I think it avoids a critical question. Its theme is that religious tolerance is critical in today's world. But there are two forms of tolerance: a) accepting that others can disagree with you without beating them to a pulp, and b) believing that all religions are morally equivalent and acceptable to God - kind of a "more than one way to heaven/salvation" statement. Gregorian seems to lump those two thoughts together. I speak not from a Muslim perspective, but a Christian one. In the mosaic of Christianity, the liberal denominations are moving towards a "all religions are acceptable to God" philosophy. Those denominations are also dying. The growth in the Christian community is with the denominations that believe in the uniqueness (and essential belief for salvation) of the historical Christian creed. And they are doing so accepting religious tolerance of the first kind, but not the second. I suspect this same issue is being played out in the Islamic world also - but because of the lack of freedom of speech, expression and religion (think Iran and Saudi Arabia especially), it is much more muted. If one's religion is the unique truth (and most traditional Christians and Muslims believe theirs is), to deprive someone else of hearing that truth (missionaries, conversions, etc.

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