

NEELK BOOK OF THE MONTH

Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think
by John L. Esposito & Dalia Mogahed
Review by Claudia Perner – May 2008

Between 2001 and 2007, tens of thousands of Muslims worldwide were interviewed in the “Gallup Poll of the Muslim World”. Now John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed’s book summarizes the poll’s results and tells us “what Islam really thinks” – or does it?

“Why do they hate us?” – a question that in the aftermath of 9/11 has come to haunt millions of Americans. Simplistic as it may be, it nevertheless appears to hit a raw nerve among those in “the West” who feel increasingly threatened by the ostensible hostility of Islam. The “Gallup Poll of the Muslim World” was designed to unveil what Muslims *really* think about the situation of their own countries and the relations between Western societies and Islam. For once, the silent majority should be heard instead of those who broadcast their views in hateful video sermons. John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed’s book presents some of the results of this research adventure.

Who Speaks for Islam? clearly is an attempt to raise attention for the diversity of Islamic lives and worldviews. Unsurprising as this insight may seem to anyone who has given the matter some thought, Esposito and Mogahed go to great lengths to stress that Islam is not just a monolithic block. *Who Speaks for Islam?* focuses on issues that in the West are perceived to represent the more controversial sides of Islam, such as the influence of *Sharia* in Islamic jurisdiction, the concept of *Jihad*, Muslim fundamentalism and women’s rights. At the same time, one cannot shake off the feeling that the book would have benefited greatly from providing a little more of the actual survey data and from simultaneously cutting down on the commentary that makes up most of the book. According to Gallup, some more survey data will be included in a new edition of the book, however, the complete data remains reserved for Gallup subscribers. Understandable as this policy may be (Gallup is a non-partisan research institution depending on subscription fees), it creates a serious problem for *Who Speaks for Islam?* as the survey data clearly is what is most interesting about the book.

Another of the book’s weaknesses is its unrestrained didacticism. It is clear that Esposito and Mogahed have an audience in mind that knows virtually nothing about Islam. The general aim to lecture an ignorant reader is visible even where distinct research results are presented or (more frequently) are merely commented on with only liminal reference to actual figures. The vagueness in statistical content is matched by a frequently flawed style, and both add up to the overall unsatisfactory impression of what could have been a fascinating book.

The book’s title is telling. Who speaks for Islam? Apparently, John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed do. It would have been much more interesting to hear Islam speak for itself. For that, it appears, one will have to consult the actual results of the Gallup Poll.

Esposito, John L. & Dalia Mogahed. *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*. New York City: Gallup Press. 2007.

For additional information on the “Gallup Poll of the Muslim World”:

<http://www.gallup.com/consulting/worldpoll/26410/gallup-center-muslim-studies.aspx>