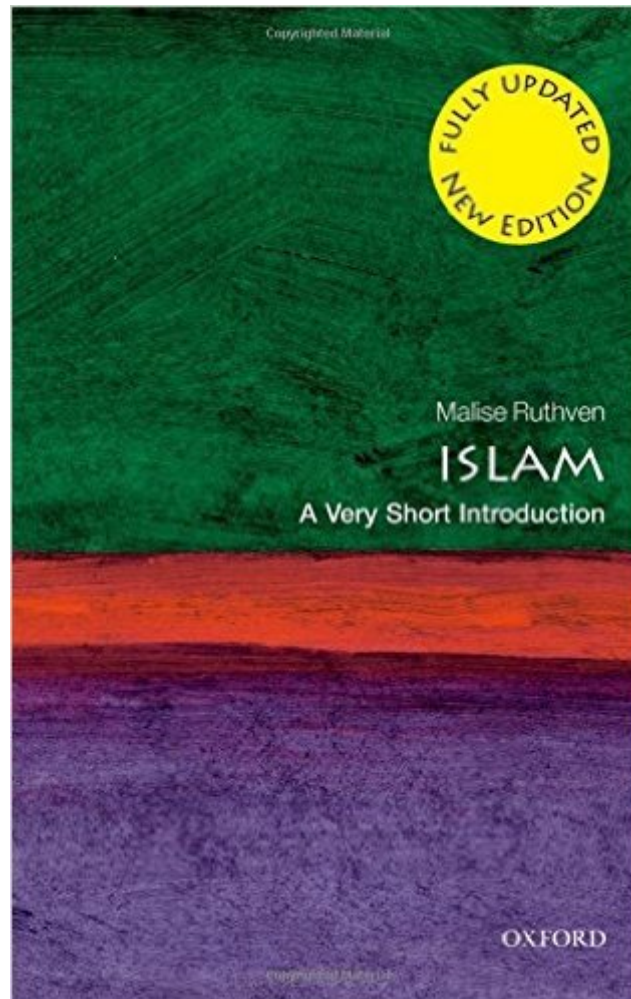


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Islam: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

Islam dominates the news, often in stories filled with images of violence. Yet these disturbing images are at odds with a faith that most adherents--who now number over a billion worldwide--would regard as no less pacific than Buddhism or Christianity. Indeed, the word Islam in Arabic means "self-surrender" and is closely related to salaam, the word for peace. In this thoroughly revised new edition, Malise Ruthven offers a balance, compact, and reliable overview of Islam. An internationally recognized authority on Islam, Ruthven offers essential insights into this major world religion, examining such issues as why Islam has such major divisions between movements such as the Shi'ites, the Sunnis, and the Wahhabis, and the central importance of the Shar'ia (Islamic law) in Islamic life. He also provides fresh perspectives on contemporary questions: Why is the greatest Jihad (holy war) now against the enemies of Islam, rather than the struggle against evil? Can women find fulfillment in Islamic societies? How must Islam adapt as it confronts the modern world? For the new edition, Ruthven brings the text up-to-date, shedding light on some of the most significant changes in the Muslim world in recent years; from the emergence of al-Qaeda and the attacks on New York and Washington on 9/11 and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. Ruthven includes a new chapter on "Globalized Islam," which examines the effects of economic globalization, the impact of international events in Middle Eastern countries, the questions surrounding Islam and democracy, and the reception and perception of Islam in the West.

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Customer Reviews

Here's what disappointed me. The author begins by complaining that such a short introduction can't adequately present Islam. Fair enough, but Ruthven then proceeds to waste much time critiquing certain points of view rather than just giving an exposition. Even worse, he often makes offhand allusions to people and historical events and takes an abstract, high-handed tone, so that I feel I would have to already be acquainted with Islam and the history of the Arab world in order to understand what he's talking about. Jeez, this was supposed to be an intro, not a refresher! On the other hand, after reading the whole thing I really did come away with a decent basic knowledge of Islam's history and beliefs, which came from someone who obviously knows a lot about it. And for that I am grateful.

As I purchased this book b/c I didn't know much about Islam, and wanted a starting point, I found it be very useful to me. I cannot evaluate the accuracy of all the information, as some other reviewers have done. I felt it was a great survey of many subtopics. Perhaps what disturbed some readers was that the book does not touch only on the "religious" aspects of Islam. However, based on another book I had read, Islam the religion is irreversibly entangled with Islamic politics and society. Indeed, the author of Islam: AVSI states as much with the first three headings in Chapter 1: Islam as Identity, Islam as Political Ideology, and Islam as Faith. This is similar to Jews, who usually identify as Jewish regardless of whether they practice the faith. I was very pleased with my purchase of this VSI, and highly recommend it. I now go on to further my learning with a trip through a translation of the Quran.

This is an excellent introduction to an understanding of the position and the role of Islam in the contemporary world. The author does not evade the difficult debate about the relationship between the West and the Islamic world, but succeeds in creating a broader perspective on this controversial issue. One can only regret that this is not the most accessible volume in the "Very Short Introduction" series. It requires substantial background knowledge to follow the author in his argumentation. A little more basic information about the facts of Islamic religion and its history would have helped considerably.

I initially bought this book because I was impressed with another "Very short introduction" entitled "The Koran" by Michael Cook. I thought that "Islam" would be as good, but I was disappointed. Instead of a thoughtful and insightful book, I found "Islam" to be a hodgepodge collection of facts, opinions and speculation that brought me no closer to understanding Islam than I had been before.

Ruthven is best in the brief sections when he sticks to comparing religions (which is apparently what he does for a living). However, the author seems to misunderstand many aspects of Islam, and makes several significant factual errors- the greatest of these perhaps is the assertion of the widespread influence of Sufism on Islam and the Muslim world as a whole. If you are thinking of buying this book in order to get an understanding of Islam, forget it. Buy "The Koran" instead, and you will get a much better understanding (and book) at the same price.

Like other reviewers, I bought this to get the basics of the history, beliefs, and practices of Islam -- I figured the title would mean the book would provide those things. I was wrong. The author spends more time discussing Islam than informing the reader about it. Imagine being an undergrad listening in on the conversation of a few post-doc students who already knew that one another knew the basics, and then some...this is the book you'd write from that. It should have been titled "A Very Short Discussion of the Politics and Historiography of Islam" -- hardly something for beginners. I think I'll go buy a Dummies guide.

Malise Ruthven is introduced as "a journalist turned academic". It must be said that, unlike virtually all of the journalists and a good number of the academics who have been let loose in this field, Ruthven is actually very well informed about Islam and there is not much that one can say against this book. It has a lot of information about medieval and modern Islam and is particularly good at bringing out the diversity of Islamic traditions, which Ruthven treats with sympathy, but without sycophancy. There are a few mistakes, however. In Ruthven's account of Islamism it should be noted that the "eldest son" of Jafar as-Sadiq was not Isma'il but Abdallah. Also, it is wrong to say that "in 909 a leader claiming descent from Isma'il proclaims himself the Mahdi and creates a state in North Africa"; in fact the first Fatimid caliph claimed descent from the above-mentioned Abdallah b. Jafar. And to say that the Nizari Ismailis "are the only group of Shi'a who still claim allegiance to a living Imam" is perhaps a bit misleading. The Tayyibi Ismailis and the Twelver Shiites also declare allegiance to an Imam who is alive in this world, even if he is hidden from public view; similarly the Zaydis accept in principle the idea of a living imamate and it is only as a result of the political situation in the Yemen that the job has remained vacant for the past several decades.

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