H ave you ever read a book that appeared promising—looked as if it might teach you something or contribute to a necessary conversation—but raised your hackles instead? My hackles were raised while reading Graham Fuller’s *A World Without Islam*. Since Fuller’s argument will ring true to many people, how did this happen? The first reading angered me, when I saw what appeared to be his tactics: his straw-man approach, generalising, stereotyping, obfuscating and dissembling. The second reading made him seem well-intentioned but confused and one-sided. Both readings are plausible and the little Fuller reveals of his methodology suggests why. Apart from any background knowledge he’s obtained over the years, he admits to relying on encyclopaedia entries and the internet. His book reads as if he’s cut-and-pasted a vast array of conflicting voices, out of context, and attempted to edit them into a coherent narrative. It didn’t work.

Fuller admits to admiring Islam, apparently as a non-believer. We don’t know what his beliefs are; he never tells us about them; his candour is aimed at others. He feels Islam has been given a raw deal, for which the West is responsible, especially Western Christianity. He has issues with some denominations and continents; his attempts at being open-minded are hampered by an obvious prejudice against Catholicism, a sense that Protestantism invented democracy, and the patronising view of Western Europe (the Old World) occasionally found in the United States (the New World).

As there are many such books about, vying for our attention, seeking to influence us, combating bias with bias, why review this one? Because Fuller has been vice-chair of the National Intelligence Council of the CIA, senior political analyst at the RAND Corporation, and adjunct professor of history at Simon Fraser University. We need to know how individuals like Fuller think, because they provide people such as the President of the United States with top-level analyses of foreign policy issues. This book tells us something of the character of these analyses. It’s full of hypotheses about what might have happened but never happened because something else happened.

Wikipedia tells us Fuller was identified as the author of the 1985 document that—according to the *New York Times*—was instrumental in the Reagan administration’s decision to secretly contact leaders in Iran, which eventually led to the covert sale of weapons to Tehran, in what became known as the Iran–Contra Affair. In the document Fuller suggested the Soviet Union was in a position to influence Iran, and the United States might gain influence by selling arms to that country. According to Fuller, he revised his opinion as the situation developed but—although he told government officials—a report of his revised opinion wasn’t circulated. Fuller denied the original document was tailored to support administration policy, a denial that might explain any atoning motives he had for writing this book.

Fuller laments the alleged Western tendency to polarise complex events into a struggle between “Western values” and the “Islamic world” because, he argues, if Islam didn’t exist, the relationship between the West and the Middle East would be much the same as it is now. Why? He says its underlying tensions are geopolitical, not religious; they predate Islam and would occur without Islam. He has a disturbing habit of linking geopolitics with religion when discussing the West but keeping them separate when discussing Islam. Why? He says the powerful affiliation of religion and the state has influenced Western (but not Eastern) Christianity infinitely more than Islam.

Fuller’s hypothesis is that, if Islam hadn’t dislodged Christianity from the Middle East, the region would still be Orthodox; there would still
be a religious struggle between Catholicism and Orthodoxy: therefore, he believes, a geopolitical struggle between West and East would still occur. This struggle has little to do with Islam and much to do with a West that apparently hasn’t changed in a thousand years. The problem is the West—particularly the United States—is only superficially aware of Middle Eastern critiques of its foreign policies, sponsored coups, backing of dictators, and carte blanche support for Israel against Palestine.

Fuller wants the West to rethink its policies, which will be difficult for the West to do, because with power comes arrogance and the inability to see how policies contribute to events. He says the Alice-in-Wonderland delusions of the West influence not only its policy-makers but also the otherwise intelligent analyses emanating from its glut of think-tanks, where the focus of analysis is invariably on “the Other”, where the effects of Western perceptions and actions are conspicuously absent. He obviously excuses himself from these skewed analyses. His are better.

Part One, “Heresy and Power”, begins with a glib description of the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—written by an outsider who thinks he knows as much as an insider. Fuller says all three religions are closely linked theologically—although he believes Christian theology is arcane—but their power struggles have magnified their theological differences for political ends. He also believes Islam is more benign. While admitting Islam’s conquest of large parts of the world had a huge impact on the conquered, he says its impact has been less damaging because Islam emerged from its landscape naturally and organically (whatever that means).

Fuller doesn’t believe any religion can define orthodoxy (right belief) and he implies something wrong with a religion that does; he believes orthodoxy is all about political power; once theological doctrine starts serving the state, clerics are recruited to bestow their imprimatur on the state. He argues that Western (but not Eastern) Christianity has been more closely tied with the state over most of its history, compared with Islam, where clerical power hasn’t exercised political authority until present-day Iran; also, Judaism has lacked the instruments of state power for most of its history but is no longer exempt as it’s now linked with political authority in Israel.

Politics was involved from the start, as the Romans made a political decision to crucify Jesus at the behest of the Sanhedrin because he threatened its local religious authority. After announcing this half-truth, Fuller immediately announces others: it was Paul, not Jesus, who established Christianity as a new religion separate from Judaism which anyone could join; during the church’s first three centuries it was roiled by debates over Christ’s nature; however, once the state adopted Christianity as its official religion, these debates became the handmaid of politics; orthodoxy and its canonical texts were codified; heterodoxy and its non-canonical texts were excluded.

We are told the concept of a canon of sacred scripture is arbitrary and power-tainted, which explains why texts of “vital importance” to understanding Christianity—including “impressive works” such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles—were barred from the Christian canon. This is nonsense. First, the Gospel of Thomas is a collection of sayings, not a connected narrative, and Fuller gives us no evidence to suggest it was barred for political rather than theological reasons. Second, the Christian canon was codified by the fourth century, the Dead Sea Scrolls weren’t discovered for another sixteen hundred years, and these scrolls pre-date Christianity. Third, the Apocryphal Acts isn’t a single work; it’s a genre most of which is Gnostic, and Fuller never explains why Christians should embrace Gnostic texts, either as canonical scripture or as important and impressive literature.

According to Fuller, if Islam didn’t exist, religious antipathies between Orthodoxy and Catholicism would continue to drive geopolitical antipathies between the Middle East and the West. However, because the West once included Orthodoxy, anti-Westernism was originally a resistance to invasion and control from Byzantium as well as Rome. Where’s this argument coming from and going? To put it simply, he believes anti-Byzantine impulses facilitated the Islamic conquest of the Middle East, and, once Islam was in control, Orthodox resentment of Catholicism merged with Islamic resentment of the West, which produced a coalition of perpetual anger.

Fuller supports this simplistic thesis—which completely ignores the current state of Orthodox–Catholic relations—with an equally simplistic parallel hypothesis. Like Islam, Orthodoxy created national churches in Eastern Europe and the Middle East—churches that remain culturally and emotionally linked to specific languages and ethnic groups—none of which was politically motivated. By contrast, Western Christianity demanded that scripture was only transmitted and ritual was only conducted in Latin. Why? Because Catholicism is monolithic, hegemonic, and more affiliated with the state than Islam or Orthodoxy. Rome had a pope, Islam had a caliph, but the caliph never arrogated
centralised political power. Fuller believes this is why, when given the choice, the Orthodox would rather live under Islam than Catholicism.

Fuller says most Jewish populations in the Middle East welcomed Islam, as they were discontented with their persecuted status in the Byzantine empire, and in fact Islam facilitated a new flowering of Jewish culture. Also, most Christian populations in the Ottoman empire remained Christian and the rhythm of their lives and worship didn’t change significantly. Overall, under the Caliphates that existed between the seventh and twentieth centuries—Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, Ottoman—where there was a conversion process it was gradual and didn’t entail huge or sudden changes to the life of the region, even as a rich new Islamic culture slowly emerged. Why? Fuller says religion mattered less to the caliphs than political, social and economic change. As benign Islam gradually moved in and took over, there was continuity in the overall character of the Middle East, thus simplistic polarities, “Islam versus Christianity” or “Islam versus the West”, made no sense.

As Islam embraced diverse populations, cultures and languages—from Spain to Central and South Asia—it became increasingly cosmopolitan; the talents of newly-conquered populations contributed to the intellectual ferment that lifted Islamic civilisation to the highest level anywhere in the world at the time and for centuries to come. Islam also had remarkable staying power—across regions, cultures and peoples—which can’t be attributed to military power, otherwise converted peoples would seek to revert to earlier forms of faith after later military power weakened. Why? Islam spoke directly to people. Its theological simplicity and clarity—compared with Christianity’s arcane theology—worked in its favour. The religious appeal of Islam and its rapid spread explain why the West feared and demonised it.

Fuller says the Crusades would have happened without Islam. Why? With the Crusades came a new awareness of a Western “Christendom” in relation to a Middle Eastern “Other”. When inciting the Crusades, the popes never referred to Islam or Muslims: they referred to heathens, non-believers, Turks and Arabs. This could imply Jews and the Orthodox as well as Muslims. Therefore, even before leaving the West, the Crusaders participated in mass murder of Jews and whole Jewish commu-

nities committed mass suicide. As the Crusaders moved through Orthodox cities they often pillaged, killed most of the inhabitants, and ate adults (boiled) and children (broiled). Also, there was a striking contrast between the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in 637, where Muslims were required by the tenets of Islam to protect the Other, and the Christian conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, where Christian doctrine in no way required Christians to protect the Other.

The Crusades began the long history of Western intervention in the Middle East, the brutality of which the West has romanticised as chivalry. There were religious reasons: the Byzantines lost control of the Holy Land to the Arabs, were losing other territories to the Turks, and needed Western aid to defend Christendom, but Rome had an ulterior motive, to restore Latin authority over the East. There were economic reasons: the great trading city-states of Venice and Genoa had a huge economic stake in increased military activity in the Mediterranean. There were geopolitical reasons: a growing social stability produced a new warrior aristocracy and European power was all armed up and ready to go somewhere; their armies would have gone east without Islam, in the name of the Latin church against the despised Greek church. Fuller says the power-hungry popes inspired, directed and commanded the political and military actions of European princes; however, he finds no parallel of Islam’s religious authorities directing the actions of Muslim armies. This is extraordinarily simplistic. The truth is far more complex.

Undaunted by his own generalisations, Fuller devotes a chapter to considering the “shared echoes” between Islam and the Reformation, which was ostensibly about religion but was really about politics. Catholicism had been successful in maintaining centralised, politicised control of religious doctrine, until it slipped during the Reformation, and Fuller believes Catholicism still attempts to retain that control in the twenty-first century. The Reformation was destabilising, in that it liberated people from centralised control over their religious ideas and empowered individuals to think about political and religious questions. It was a period of democratisation; not that there were any functioning democracies at the time but at least individuals were encouraged to read the texts, think for themselves, and become active in political and social affairs.
Unlike Catholicism, there’s no single Reformation church and no single Islam. Why? The Reformation and Islam show remarkable parallels, as similar forces come into play, typical of the evolution of most religions when attempting to coexist with power. In a modern democratic era, it should be no surprise that people are attempting to take control of their religion from the hands of the elite, or the state, where it resided for most of history. According to Fuller, this has never happened within Orthodoxy and it certainly isn’t happening within Catholicism. While Islam has never undergone an equivalent of the Reformation, Muslims have done their own rethinking about the links between religion and politics, resulting in destabilising forces ranging from sharp critiques of their own ruling regimes, the creation of new organisations to achieve political and social goals, and, he admits, adopting the use of terror against selected domestic enemies and foreign invaders.

Part Two, “Meeting at the Civilizational Borders of Islam”, looks beyond the Middle East at cultures with which Islam has had close interactions and established varying forms of co-existence. Fuller’s purpose is to demonstrate how Islam functions under diverse circumstances and to show its flexibility. He assumes religion isn’t the issue at stake in these interactions while ethnicity and community are. Conversely, he believes religion is more the issue in Western imperial experience.

Russia has lived intimately with Islam for nearly a thousand years and Muslims comprise 12 to 15 per cent of its population; further, Muslims aren’t immigrants, as they are in Western Europe; they’re part of the conquered indigenous populations of the former Russian empire. Virtually all Muslims in Russia are ethnically non-Russian and belong to other ethnic groups; thus in Russia religious difference signifies ethnic difference. Over the centuries Russia has consecutively viewed its Muslim populations as enemies, pillars of the Tsarist state, loyal members of the Russian empire, ideological partners against Western imperialism, unreliable nationalists, dangerous secessionists or terrorists, and once again as potential allies against Western imperialism. With the fall of communism, and the end of state-sponsored atheism, Muslim activists have entered Russia to propagate Islamist ideas with clear political intent: mostly non-violent but sometimes highly violent. However, while Islamic identity is on the rise, Fuller believes it’s evolving as an aspect of Russian multiculturalism. Also, because the Russian engagement with Islam is older, deeper, more extensive and more complex than the West’s, he says the two will always coexist within a common anti-Western space.

China’s encounters with Islam were originally peaceful and productive, even though Arabs defeated the Chinese near present-day Kyrgyzstan, which halted China’s expansion into Central Asia during the Tang Dynasty (617–907). Fuller says Islam has made fascinating accommodations within China. Why? It was impressed with Chinese philosophy. Muslims gravitated towards Confucianism, which provided an ethical and moral framework that didn’t challenge Islamic theology. Muslims had an honoured place in Chinese society as a mercantile class under the Song Dynasty (960–1279) and they flourished under the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), although he admits things deteriorated under the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) when there were occasional uprisings and near-genocidal policies killed millions. Overall, though, he believes Islam’s experience with China parallels its Russian experience. As China knows its future power in Asia depends on close working relations with Muslim states and peoples, a bloody clash with Islam isn’t a working assumption for Beijing. It will extirpate unwanted Islamic minorities gradually and quietly. This extirpation apparently won’t bother Islam generally, because most Muslims see China as an important and welcome counterpoise to the unlimited exercise of Western power against them.

India represented an intellectual frontier for Islam, as Hinduism was unconnected with the Middle East, or the “People of the Book”, and was the most shocking religion Islam would encounter. Unfortunately, Indian Muslims have become disadvantaged minorities within the society they once ruled and helped shape. How did this happen? India was partitioned in 1947, in what Fuller calls a “British-run process of ethnic cleansing”. He hypothesises, as many do, that had there never been a British Raj the partition would never have happened. Why? If the Mughal empire had gradually weakened over time, Hindus and Muslims would have eventually worked out a messy organic solution to their relative interests and kept the concept of a united India as a common goal, albeit on a federal basis. To Fuller, it’s unlikely a partition could ever have been conceived or executed by the Hindu and Muslim players themselves; it took external imperial intervention and sweeping authority to make the operation possible. Far more than Islam, British imperial control of India has the most to answer for, in contriving an unnecessary partition that solved nothing and may lead to nuclear war.

Are Muslims in the West loyal citizens or a fifth column? Fuller argues the migrant experience of Muslims in United States and Western Europe is different. Muslim migrants to the United States are
mainly professionals going to a place where everyone is an immigrant (the New World). Muslim migrants to Western Europe are mainly the working class going to a place that isn’t an immigrant society by nature; a place that, unlike the United States, consists of established nationalities and cultures often set in conservative patterns (the Old World). The socio-economic condition of Muslims in Western Europe is more fragile than in the United States, as they are significantly more likely to be poorly educated and unemployed. As a result they are viewed as outsiders, often feel alienated, and retreat into their own cultural shell, thereby reinforcing stereotypes of Muslim resistance to assimilation. Fuller believes the maintenance of an Islamic identity creates suspicions for post-religious Western Europe. The more religious United States has different suspicions: those of its religious bigots—the mirror image of Al Qaeda zealots—who see Islam and Christianity as engaged in an implacable struggle.

Part Three, “The Place of Islam in the Modern World”, tells Fuller’s version of the tragic story at the heart of the Arab confrontation with the West: the long poignant trajectory of Muslim glory, gradual Muslim decline, rise of the West, takeover of the Arab world by the Western powers, anti-colonial struggle, and contemporary resentments against neo-imperialist policies of intervention and control. It’s a story of dissatisfactions based on real, concrete, negative events in which Islam provides focus, colour and vigour but isn’t central to the story, as the problem would still exist without Islam.

For Arabs today, few issues burn more than freedom from Western imperialism. Why? Imperial rule quickly distorted the natural development of the Arab world by dismantling traditional structures of leadership and governance, destroying traditional institutions, and upsetting cultural patterns, while failing to encourage the organic development of native alternatives. By the end of the First World War, nearly the entire Arab world had fallen under Western control. The arbitrary redrawing of borders by the colonial powers was one of the most damaging aspects of colonial rule. Ethnic groups were divided, natural lines of political and social symbioses were severed, arbitrary new administrations were established, and economic development was skewed to meet the needs of the metropole rather than the nation. Had Arabs been left to their own devices, there might be fewer Arab states in existence today. Instead we see artificial countries, with problematic loyalties, run by oppressive and divisive regimes, controlled by the imperial needs of states thousands of miles away. All this has left damaging political, economic, social and psychological time-bombs which continue to explode and produce internal tensions that will take a long time to resolve.

The Palestinian problem, although exceptional, is a case in point. Fuller argues the problem began when European Jews migrated to Palestine with vast funding from Western Jewry. Palestinians have bitterly resented being asked to pay the price for European sins. Three quarters of a million Palestinians were displaced in Israeli operations, which amounted to ethnic cleansing, while laying the foundation of the new Jewish state. If there had never been an Islam, Christian Palestinians would no more happily have lost their lands to Jews or refrained from guerrilla actions to get them back. Indeed, Palestinian Christians have been prominent in guerrilla movements against Israel. While the Arab–Israeli conflict has taken on religious overtones, Islam had nothing to do with its origins. If we are to move forward, Fuller believes the West must cease to play the Islam-as-Other card as an explanatory or operating factor in the Middle East; or anywhere else for that matter.

The truth about Islam can never be a lie about Christianity. An attempt to represent the Middle East shouldn’t misrepresent the West. In this case Fuller packages his lies and misrepresentations in half-truths, among hypotheses about what might have happened but never happened because something else happened. Is that what foreign policy analysis emanating from the CIA and RAND really looks like? The most repeated plea in his book is a paraphrase of: “Please don’t misunderstand me, I’m not trying to exonerate Islam/blame Christianity/blame the West/over-simplify historical complexities.” Yet that’s exactly what he does, over and over again. Spare a thought for those who depend on analyses like his; those who must decide what advice is worth taking; those who know there’s more to the story than they’re being told. The other half of the story, in fact.

Michael Giffin wrote on same-sex marriage in the March issue.