INSIDE ISLAM: A GUIDE FOR CATHOLICS
100 QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
By Daniel Ali and Robert Spencer
West Chester, Pennsylvania: Ascension Press
Reviewed by James H. Kroeger

This is a problematic book, and this review hopes to clearly illustrate why it is not to be taken as “a guide for Catholics” as its subtitle claims. A book of this nature does not promote genuine interreligious dialogue, which as recent popes have continually emphasized, is “part of the Church’s evangelizing mission” (Redemptoris Missio 55).

The co-authors of the book are Daniel Ali and Robert Spencer. Ali was raised in Iraq and converted to Catholicism from Islam in 1998; he is co-host of the video series Islam and Christianity on the Eternal Word Television Network. Spencer says of himself that his study of Islam began in 1980; he has written Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions about the World’s Fastest Growing Faith (Encounter Books, 2002). Mitch Pacwa, S.J. writes a forward to the book, in which he
commends the authors, asserting that "No one who is beginning to confront the reality of Islam should be without this book" (14).

*Inside Islam: A Guide for Catholics* utilizes a question-and-answer format; one hundred questions are posed and given response. The book has several additional sections: "Sharing the Gospel with Muslims" (145-147); "Contradictory Teachings ... found in the Koran and Hadith" (149-154); [End] "Notes" (155-166); "Appendix: Nuestra Actitute" (167-172); "Index" (173-178).

Spencer states several reasons for the relevance of the book: "most Catholics know little about this formidable faith [of Islam]" (15). He notes, "The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the recent war with Iraq, and the ongoing crisis plaguing the Holy Land have put Islam in the news now more than ever" (*Ibid*). "Islam is now embraced by more than a billion people—one out of every six people on the planet" (16). Indeed, a deeper understanding of the Islamic faith is needed, but in the opinion of this reviewer, this book is *not* a balanced source for such an appreciation. Some brief examples will illustrate this assertion.

Question One, "What is Islam?" presents a very superficial answer; no effort is made to portray what is "true and holy" or the "spiritual and moral goods" found in this faith as Vatican II recommended in *Nuestra Actitute*. In the presentation of Islamic faith about Jesus (Question 33), Christian-Islamic divergences are noted but not in a neutral manner. For example, the authors state: "As He does in the infancy narratives of the heretical gospels, Jesus in the Koran even speaks in His cradle" (55). Christian exegetes term the non-canonical gospels as "apocryphal"; this statement implies that the Koran (authors' spelling) [not the preferred Qur'an] includes heresy.

When the authors speak about Mary (Question 40) they assert that the Koran contains "mixtures of legends, apocrypha, and certain canonical books" (62); they go on to point out some inconsistencies between the Bible and the Koran, and conclude the section with this
disparaging remark: "If the Koran is so obviously mistaken on this point, why should it be considered reliable on other points of history?" (Ibid.).

Another clear example of the deprecatory tone of the book is the following: "it is every Christian’s duty to become informed about Islam since it (along with secularism) is the Church’s chief and most energetic present-day rival for souls" (86). It is unfortunate that a sincere but unsuspecting Christian reader desiring a better understanding of the Islamic faith will be led astray by several elements of this volume.

Permit one final example which shows the negativity toward Islam woven into this book. Questions 54 to 60 address the Islamic and Christian understanding of God. The answers given assert that Christians and Muslims do not worship the same God. This is clearly in opposition to the position of the Second Vatican Council in Lumen Gentium 16. As Islamic expert Robert Caspar, who was an advisor at Vatican II, has noted: "We cannot ever again say that we do not adore the same God, even if we call Him by different names" ("Islam according to Vatican II," 237). The authors Ali and Spencer often show their bias: "In Islam, a distorted view of God (Allah) has often led to several problems" (83).

This reviewer purchased the Ali-Spencer book through an internet supplier; the complete title was attractive and portrayed the volume as a resource in Muslim-Christian relations: Inside Islam: A Guide for Catholics. 100 Questions and Answers. Unfortunately, the opposite proved true. A reader looks in vain for a “Catholic” appreciation of Islam and interfaith dialogue in this book; nowhere—even in the endnotes—will the positive teachings of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue or those of recent popes (Paul VI and John Paul II) be found between the covers of this volume. In a word, it is not a trustworthy guide for Catholics—or anyone else. Cautet emptor! Let the buyer—and reader—beware!