

Complexities of the Koran Make Mastery a Challenge

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It opens with the al-Fatiha, a succinct rendering of Islam's essence also included in the prayers that observant Muslims recite five times daily. For Muslims, the holy book known in formal Arabic as al-Qur'an al-Karim, "the noble Koran," has a status roughly equivalent to that of Jesus for Christians.

"In the name of Allah, the all-merciful, the most generous. Praise and gratefulness are due to Allah alone, the Lord of all being, the all-merciful, the most gracious, Lord of the day of judgment," the Koran begins.

"You alone do we worship, and from you alone do we seek aid. Guide us to the straight way, the way of those on whom you have bestowed your blessings, not of those who have been condemned [by you], nor of those who go astray."

Muslim tradition holds that Allah—Arabic for "the God"—began to reveal the Koran to the prophet Muhammad during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Arab and Muslim lunar calendar, which began again Dec. 31 with the sighting of the new moon. Because of the month's association with the Koran, Muslims are directed by their faith to spend additional time during Ramadan studying the text.

But understanding the Koran's subtleties is no easy matter. The language of the Koran—which Muslims venerate as a virtual extension of God—is exceedingly poetic and difficult to grasp, even for many Arabic-speaking Muslims.

"For the younger generation of Muslims, in the United States in particular, the Koran is very hard because this generation is not as well schooled in Arabic and the traditions," said Fathi Osman, a retired professor of Islamic studies at the University of Southern California.

Revered in its original Arabic as the spoken word of God as transmitted by the Angel Gabriel to Muhammad over 23 years in 7th-century Arabia, the Koran follows no narrative or chronological line. It skips from theme to theme and has Allah speaking in first as well as third person as it lays out a complex standard for relating to God, other people and the natural world.

A new book by Osman, "Concepts of the Quran" (MVI Publications), attempts to make the Koran more accessible to English-speaking American Muslims, particularly converts. Osman said the generally limited knowledge of Arabic on the part of most converts, combined with their newness to the faith, often makes it difficult for them to grasp the Koran's lessons.

Converts, the majority of them African Americans, account for about one-fourth of the estimated 3 million to 6 million Muslims in the United States, said Ihsan Badby, a Muslim demographer and international relations professor at Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C. American Muslims from Arabic-speaking backgrounds make up about 20 percent of the total.

Osman , who has a doctorate in Islamic studies from Princeton University, called his approach to the Koran “modernistic.”

“I am traditional in the sense that I am tied to the Koran,” he said. “But I understand it as a contemporary person. The human mind changes, even if the Koran does not, so the understanding of it changes, within the rules of Arabic.”

Osman said his book—published in a limited edition with the aid of the Islamic Center of Southern California in Los Angeles—seeks to provide context for understanding the Koran, particularly its more controversial aspects, such as its pronouncements on women.

Westerners, and some more-liberal Muslims, both men and women, often view the Koran as supporting male supremacy. However, Osman believes that is a false reading if the full range of references to women are considered.

“There’s a sura that speaks of the men being in charge of women,” he said. “Critics often seize upon that. But if read in the context of the full Koran, it becomes clear that what is meant is not in the sense of superiority, but rather in the sense of responsibility. . . . Men have a greater responsibility to women than women to men because a woman with children or who is pregnant cannot earn a living as easily as can a man.”

If the Koran is difficult even for Arabic speakers, how can the non-Arabic-speaking Westerner hope to comprehend it?

Huston Smith, author of “The World’s Religions” and widely regarded as a leading academic exponent of the religious experience, said he was nearly baffled by the Koran when he first tried to read it in the 1950s.

“To an outsider, the Koran is almost an incoherent text,” Smith said.

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