

How to Teach This Book
Introducing the Qur'an for Today's Reader
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Islam has played a central role in some of the biggest news stories of the twenty-first century. The tragic events of September 11, 2001, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the role of Iran in the international community, and terrorist attacks in Europe, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the world are just a few examples of stories related to Islam that have made headlines around the globe. If we include coverage of the controversies surrounding other things like the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad that most Muslims found insulting, the election of the first Muslim-American to Congress, and the “ground zero mosque” in New York City it would be fair to say that Islam has been front and center in the news virtually non-stop since the turn of the new millennium.

Of course, Islam was often discussed and debated long before we rang in the year 2000. But I highlight that moment because it's probably around the time that most of our students began to pay attention to world events and became conscious of Islam's presence and role. It is also around that time that expressions of anger, fear, and even hatred toward Muslims and their faith became a more common element in public and social discourse, a phenomenon some have referred to as “Islamophobia.” In other words, our students have only known a world in which Islam is often viewed suspiciously and many consider Muslims to be the enemy.

This book attempts to respond to that situation by introducing students to the Qur'an, the sacred text of Islam, in an accessible and reliable way. Like the Bible for Jews and Christians, the Qur'an is extremely influential in shaping how Muslims understand God, themselves, and the world around them. It is the cornerstone of their faith, and every belief and practice of Muslims is somehow informed by the teachings of the Qur'an. In an effort to appeal to the curiosity of

students and to help focus the coverage, the book is organized thematically around seven topics that should be of interest to modern readers: the Natural Environment; the Family; Gender and Sexuality; Muslim/Non-Muslim Relations; *Jihād*; War and Violence; and Death and the Afterlife. While not an exhaustive treatment of the contents of the Qur'an, this approach provides a comprehensive overview of the text's teachings on some of the most important topics of our day.

Many instructors who use this book will have already taught courses on the Bible or other sacred texts. That experience will prove valuable if this is the first time you are teaching a course on the Qur'an. As with the biblical material, all students will begin the course with certain preconceptions and ideas about the Qur'an and how it functions in Muslim life. Such notions come from many sources—family, friends, church or synagogue, and the media—and some will be more accurate than others. It's important to acknowledge this early in the semester in order to give students the opportunity to express their attitudes and reflect on where they come from. I typically spend the first class period or two on this, and I usually ask students to write a brief essay that articulates their views on the Qur'an before the semester starts. At the end of the course I return these essays to the students and ask them to consider how their understanding of the Qur'an has evolved throughout the semester.

You will be able to draw upon many of the methods and tools of biblical studies or other areas of the study of Religion to help your students work their way through the book and deepen their understanding of the Qur'an. Two aspects of academic study of Religion that are mentioned repeatedly throughout the book are context and interpretation. In the classroom you can make use of these concepts to address many sections of the Qur'an that are often considered to be problematic or controversial, like its view of women and its seeming endorsement of violence.

Students should be constantly reminded that, like any other text, the Qur'an emerged within and responded to a particular historical context, and the interplay between context and interpretation continues to loom large into the present day. The latter point is stressed frequently in the book through treatments of how modern interpreters—both Muslim and non-Muslim—have attempted to offer fresh readings that challenge traditional ways of understanding certain passages.

The affinities between the Qur'an and the Bible or other sacred texts you have studied can be effectively and creatively engaged in the classroom. The important differences between the two texts should not be whitewashed or ignored, but the presence of biblical themes and figures in the Qur'an can help the student who is familiar with the Bible think about the Islamic text (and the Bible) in new ways. Many of these shared themes and characters are mentioned in the book, and they can serve as a good starting point for a discussion of the similarities and differences between the Bible and the Qur'an.

Each chapter begins with an outline of its main sections and each contains many textboxes that summarize the discussion or further explain something that is briefly mentioned. A list of additional readings, discussion questions, and key terms is found at the end of each chapter. The questions can help initiate discussion in class or they might form the basis for a quiz or an exam. Most of the key terms are in Arabic and some students might find them difficult to keep straight, especially words that look similar to one another. I have tried to keep the Arabic terms to a minimum, but I believe it's important for students to be familiar with the Arabic terminology that is commonly used by Muslims to refer to important concepts or aspects of the Qur'an. A set of sound files that contain the pronunciations of the Arabic key terms can be found at the book's website. I have also tried to avoid detailed and complex discussions of matters related to the

Arabic language, but in a few places in the text and textboxes I explain certain aspects of Arabic that are related to a point I am trying to make.

Some instructors may wish to have several quizzes or exams throughout the semester. The website contains a list of test questions for each chapter, along with a chapter summary and list of the definitions of key terms found in the chapter. An appendix to the book contains an alphabetized list of all the key terms and their definitions. Many of the test questions on the website can be answered in a few sentences or a paragraph, but some can be slightly modified to serve as essay questions that are more comprehensive in scope. There is also a file on the website that contains sample syllabi that show how the book might be used in several different course formats. This file also contains examples of paper or presentation assignments for several of the book's chapters.