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Contact: Kelly Hughes, 312-280-8126
kelly@dechanthughes.com

New Book Explores the Qur'an as American Scripture
Quaker Academic Michael Birkel in Conversation with American Muslim Scholars

Islam and its holy book, the Qur'an, are often misunderstood today—even viewed as a threat. Now, a new book follows the Qur'an as it becomes an American scripture. *Qur'an in Conversation* (Baylor University Press, August 15, 2014, \$39.95, cloth) brings together a range of Muslim leaders and scholars in conversation with Quaker academic Michael Birkel to explore how Islam is believed and lived out in North America.

Birkel, Professor of Religion at Earlham College in Indiana, shows that non-Muslims can be enriched by an encounter with the Qur'an while remaining rooted in their own faith. He wrote *Qur'an in Conversation* “for readers of goodwill who are curious to learn more, who are rightly suspicious of rancorous distortions of Islam, and who would like to hear thoughtful Muslims themselves talk about their Scripture in ways that outsiders can comprehend.”

Birkel's conversation partners “demonstrate a breadth and depth of intellectual vitality,” he says. “They do not all agree with one another. Nor is such agreement required in Islam, where the tradition values diversity of thought.”

Among the more than twenty contributors are Hassan al-Qazwini, imam of the largest mosque in North America, the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn, Michigan; Jonathan A. C. Brown, Associate Professor of Islamic Studies and Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University; Ingrid Mattson, former president of the Islamic Society of North America, currently Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Western Ontario; and Eboo Patel, founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core. The wide range of reflections and interpretations include many common themes, such as:

- The oneness of God
- Divine mercy
- Divine and human kindness
- Human dignity
- Religious diversity, respect, and cooperation

The contributors grapple with some controversial and difficult passages, including the so-called “wife-beating” verse. Amina Wadud, widely recognized as the mother of Islamic feminism, notes in her conversation with Birkel that believing Muslims should read the Qur'an with an eye toward more equality in Muslim culture.

Another provocative passage is the injunction to “kill the idolaters wherever you find them.” Jamal Badawi, Professor Emeritus of Commerce and Religion at St. Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, argues that “the dominant voice in the Qur'an is tolerance, respect, and peaceful living together between Muslims and the People of the Book [Jews and Christians].” Thus, as

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Birkel describes, “the few are to be interpreted in light of the many.” Badawi focuses on how tradition teaches Muslims to read the Qur’an properly to avoid the hijacking of Islam’s holy book.

The Qur’an’s emphasis on divine mercy comes up in every conversation in the book. Expounding on the first sura of the Qur’an, Ovamir Anjum, chair of Islamic Studies at the University of Toledo, says, “When one opens the Qur’an and reads ‘In the name of Allah who is most merciful and ever merciful,’ if one does not feel that divine mercy, then one is not reading the Qur’an.”

Mohammad Hassan Khalil, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Michigan State University, explores the idea of divine mercy extending the possibility of salvation to non-Muslims, showing that it is not a new element in Islam, but rather a value that was manifest when Islam was culturally powerful and therefore in no need of apologizing to a non-Muslim majority.

Birkel concludes: “The Qur’an must be read from its centeredness in mercy, a wide mercy that permits both Muslims and non-Muslims to flourish both in this life and the next....The face of God is to be seen everywhere, and so it is imperative to treat all with compassion and respect for their dignity. Ethical directives in the Qur’an are to be understood in light of divine values that are shared among faiths, such as kindness and care for those in need.”

While differing interpretations and disagreements were present among the contributors, these and other themes were held forth as the core message of the Qur’an, Birkel says. “Taken together, they describe a universe with a compassionate Creator and with human beings who are capable of creating a society characterized by goodness to one another and by devotion to God.”

Michael Birkel is Professor of Religion at Earlham College, a liberal arts college founded by Quakers in Richmond, Indiana.

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