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Coming to Terms with the Qur'an

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Unlike the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity, which are dynamic and open to the possibilities of interpretation (although the extent to which different groups accept interpretations varies), the Qur'an, Islam's sacred text, has long been regarded by Muslims and non-Muslims as one that is never open to such treatment.

In this festschrift, Mohammed and Rippin gather fourteen essays in honor of Islamic scholar Issa J. Boullata, a professor at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in Toronto. Boullata has spent his life challenging long-held ideas about the Qur'an and encouraging generations of scholars to situate the Qur'an in its historical and cultural context. Contributors to this volume include students Boullata has mentored as well as his friends who have discussed these issues with him over the years.

The book is divided into three sections. Part One identifies problems in reading the Qur'an and includes essays on topics from the concept of reform in the Qur'an to the uses of metaphor and authority. Part Two focuses on the Qur'an in history and includes essays that examine the Dome of the Rocka spot sacred to Muslims, Jews, and Christians, as well as the dialectics of the Sunnis and Shi'ites and their readings of the book. Part Three examines the Qur'an in the modern world, especially the ways various teachers have approached the text in Egypt, Syria, and India.

Any collection of essays is bound to be uneven, and this one is no exception. However, this is a quibble, for the works by this group of scholars challenge traditional thinking about the Qur'an and encourages close reading and thinking about the texts. For example, in his essay, "The Qur'an, Chosen People and Holy Land," Seth Ward, who teaches Islamic history and religious studies at the University of Wyoming at Laramie, engages in a close reading of several hadiths (verses) to demonstrate that "many verses in the Qur'an support the chosenness of Israel, and even God's specific promise of the land to the Israelites." Ward encourages this close reading of the text as a means of fostering Muslim—Jewish dialogue.

General readers may have difficulty following some of the essays since the authors are speaking to themselves as much as to a broader audience, and they often use specialized language. Overall, however, the essays are thoughtful and provide fresh insights into the nature of Islam and the character and authority of the Qur'an.
HENRY L. CARRIGAN (May 7, 2008)

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