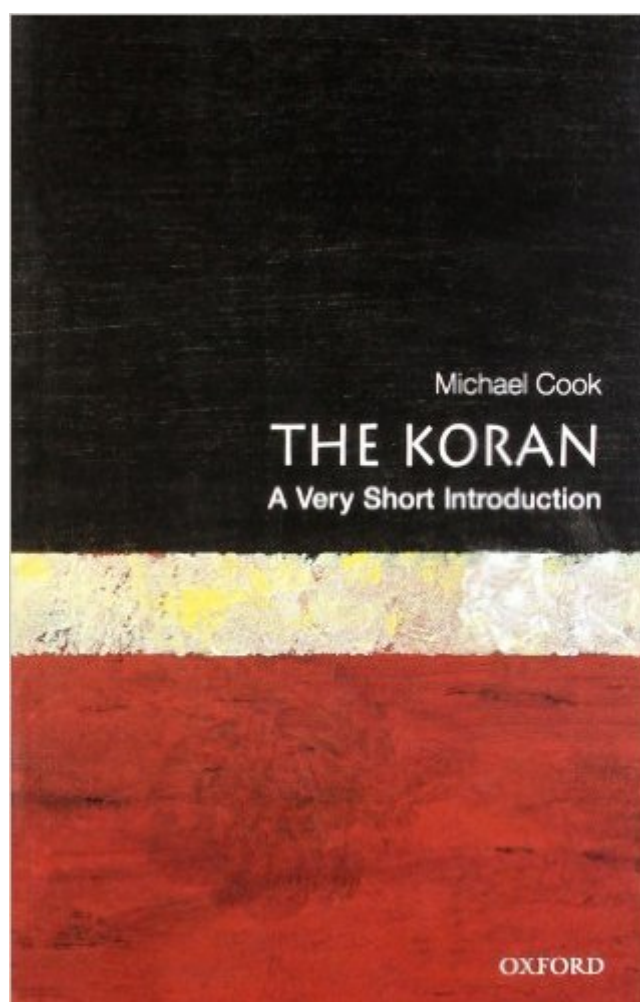


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The Koran: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

The Koran has constituted a remarkably resilient core of identity and continuity for a religious tradition that is now in its fifteenth century. In this Very Short Introduction, Michael Cook provides a lucid and direct account of the significance of the Koran both in the modern world and in that of traditional Islam. He gives vivid accounts of its role in Muslim civilization, illustrates the diversity of interpretations championed by traditional and modern commentators, discusses the processes by which the book took shape, and compares it to other scriptures and classics of the historic cultures of Eurasia. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

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Customer Reviews

I really appreciated this (very) short introduction to the Koran. As a Christian who is fairly familiar with my own tradition's sacred book, the Bible, I found it helpful in explaining how the Koran and Bible are different. The books that make up the Bible were written over many centuries, the Koran was written and compiled in less than a century (and five centuries after the latest book in the New Testament). Most Jews and Christians read their Bibles in a translation (leaving it to their biblical scholars to learn the original languages); the Koran is read and recited exclusively in its original Arabic, even in countries where Arabic is not a native language (Iran, Malaysia). The Bible contains many types of literature--poetry, wisdom sayings, compelling narratives, prophetic utterances; the Koran refers to events and stories (including some, like Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, from the

Jewish and Christian Scriptures) but has no narratives of its own (not even the story of its primary prophet, Muhammad) and consists only of prophetic utterances. The Bible is quite long; the Koran is relatively short and some Muslims have memorized it in its entirety. The Bible plays a significant role in the liturgy of Jews and Christians; public reading of the Koran is not part of Islamic public worship. However, like the Hebrew Bible with its Midrashim and Talmud, and New Testament with the writings of the church fathers, the Koran has gathered around itself a enormous body of commentaries to help explain its difficult and contradictory texts. Many Islamic beliefs that are attributed to the Koran are actually based on the commentaries of its interpreters. I liked this book because it focused solely on the Koran itself.

The Koran (in the OUP "Very Short Introductions" series,) Oxford 2000. Pious Muslims may feel that in the presence of the text and its commentaries, they do not need Professor Michael Cook's "very short introduction" to the Koran. The pious may also wish to stay away because Professor Cook was once associated with the notorious "Hagarine hypothesis" (put forth in the 1977 book: Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook) though he has since backed away from some of the more extreme claims of that book. But "The Koran, a very short introduction" turns out to be a very witty and interesting book, full of insights that the most pious Muslim will find informative and stimulating. There is a tendency to avoid difficult issues at a time when Likudniks, oil barons and Christian fundamentalists are trying to permanently colonize huge chunks of the Middle East, but it is unlikely that the Binladens of the Islamic world will be able to provide an intellectual framework adequate to the task at hand. Un-nerving as it may be, Muslims have no choice but to re-examine and reconstruct their faith. Professor Cook's "short introduction" may lead on to better and bigger things. Professor Cook starts by discussing what constitutes a sacred scripture and the forms such scriptures have taken in different civilizations. He then outlines the role the Koran plays in Muslims culture and how this is similar and how it differs from the role played by the Bible or the Vedas in their cultures. A few short selections from the Quran (the Fatiha, surah alfeel, the "throne verse", the "sword verse", among others) are presented in standard translations and used to illustrate the Quranic message and how it is perceived.

Let's face it: most of us who've lately been reading books on Islam and the Qur'an are doing so to understand a religion we for the most part ignored prior to 9/11. We're putting ourselves through a crash course on Islam and Islamic culture in the hopes that we can figure out what Islam's basic tenets are, and how it is that the Taliban and al-Qaida can claim the religion as their justification for

repression and terror. Obviously one of the first places to start is with the Qur'an itself. But to Westerners who've never opened it, the book can be intimidating and arcane. Michael Cook's little volume on the Qur'an is a decent introduction to its structure, basic principles, interpretation, and history. Some points in Cook's book are of more immediate service to the beginner than others. Cook's discussion of the difficulties encountered in translating the Qur'an's Arabic into other languages may not be of great interest to the beginner. But his overview of the various Muslim schools of exegesis or interpretation certainly will be, for this discussion begins to reveal to the reader that there's no more of a uniform way of reading the Qur'an than there is of reading the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. As a consequence, Qur'anic verses can mean different things to Muslims coming from different exegetical traditions. Cook illustrates this point in Chapter 4 by discussing the "sword verse" (Sura 9:5) and the "tribute verse" (Sura 9:29). These two verses are frequently appealed to by commentators on Islam's attitude to "infidels." Cook does a fine job of showing that the verses can be read either as harshly intolerant or as live-and-let-live, depending on how one parses the text.

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