

## **Islam: A Guide for Jews and Christians**

*F. E. Peters*

*Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003. 285 pages.*

In the epilogue of *Islam: A Guide for Jews and Christians*, Francis Edward Peters, an expert on medieval Arab thinkers and the author of several comparative works on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, describes what might have led him to write the present book: while sitting at his breakfast table, he watched the 9/11 events from his window. “My chief reaction on that terrible day was one of profound sadness [...] at the sure knowledge of the hate and misunderstanding that prompted the act ... I have spent half of my professional life trying to explain the hate and unravel the misunderstanding that pervades religious history” (p. 276).

This book seeks to describe milestones of Islamic history, as well as its core beliefs and customs, to western readers who are supposedly familiar with the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. It is not an academic work *per se*, since, like his two-volume *The Monotheists: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conflict and Competition* (Princeton University Press: 2003), whose paragraphs on Islam are in fact similar – if not identical – to considerable portions of the present work, it lacks footnotes and a bibliography. The book contains nothing new for those already involved in this field. However, as it is the outcome of his long acquaintance with the Arabic sources and considerable classroom experience, it is extremely valuable and accessible both for students and interested readers. From this respect, anyone teaching introductory courses on Islam might benefit tremendously from Peters' historical and cultural insights as well as from the didactic method employed here.

Peters addresses Islam's historical, theological, and jurisprudential aspects by a systematic reading of the Qur'an. His readers' presumed knowledge of Biblical figures, stories, and topics allows the author to sketch the similarities between the three monotheistic religions while pointing out the affiliation between the Qur'anic text and the Bible. In that respect, the book almost reconstructs Muhammad's mission in bringing God's words to communities familiar with the Biblical stories. Their ability to compare the Hebrew prophets with the Arab one aroused their aversion toward Muhammad's message. In other words, those Jews of Madinah who knew their scriptures were not inclined to accept Muhammad's prophetic message. Peters wishes to exploit this here in order to explain Islam's tenets and history to his Jewish and Christian readers, thereby making Islam more accessible and understandable to the American public "newly aware of Islam" (p. 274).

The book comprises ten chapters of uneven quality and interest. I found the chapters on the parallels between the Biblical and Qur'anic theistic concepts (chapter 1), Arabia's pre-Islamic past (chapter 2), and the Makkan and Madinan periods (chapters 3 and 4, respectively) very interesting and well-written. The author's frequent citations from the Qur'an are necessary and compatible with his profession that "there is only one way to approach Islam and that is to open and read from the pages of the Qur'an" (p. 1). This is a rather courageous approach, given the fact that generations of believers and academic scholars dared not deal with the Qur'anic text without the mediation of medieval exegetes. In a way, Peters leads his readers to a straightforward approach to the Qur'anic (although translated) text, an approach that is

alien to the text itself and to the religious culture in which it is embedded. Had this book started with the excellent fifth chapter, in which Peters deals with the nature of the Qur'anic text and the critical role of Qur'anic exegesis, it would have served the book's purposes more faithfully.

The sixth chapter, "The Umma: Allah's Commonwealth," summarizes fourteen centuries of Islamic sovereignty in twenty-eight pages. Starting with the seventh-century caliphs succeeding the Prophet, while focusing on the political roots of the Sunni-Shiah controversy and ending with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the chapter leaves the average reader dazzled by the abundance of names, dates, and events. The assuring narrative tone, the hallmark of Peters' writing, disappears, as does the use of the Qur'anic text. A similar perplexing sensation arises in chapter 8, in which he deals with two apparently unrelated topics: the relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims during the caliphate, and the formulation of Islamic creeds. The concept of jihad, which is interwoven into this chapter along with an unsatisfactory recounting of historical events, namely, from the raid on the Khaybar oasis (627) through the establishment of Israel (1948) and Sadat's assassination (1981), amplifies the hunch that what works wonderfully in the classroom looks chaotic and unsystematic in writing.

It is a pity that this book was not properly edited. There are several repetitions: the discussion on the illiterate (*ummi*) prophet appears on pp. 22 and 60; the Makkans' claim that the prophetic message is only yarns appears on pp. 21, 60, and 108; and the Sunni-Shiah controversy, although from different angles, is discussed on pp. 139-41 and 203-06. In addition, the very few Hebrew citations are inaccurate (p. 2, the correct reading is *ehey ashher ehey*; p. 259, the correct name is Gey ben Hinom). In one case, he chose to quote the Hebrew in the Ashkenazic pronunciation and not in the Sephardic pronunciation of the standard Hebrew (p. 3 should read *ha-Qadosh Barukh Hu*). The Arabic names and terms, on the other hand, are well transliterated, except from one typo (p. 123 should read Daud ibn Khalaf). The index is most useful and well organized. Since Peters uses a considerable number of Qur'anic citations in almost every chapter, it is quite unfortunate that he does not identify which English-language translation he used. Generally, the references are accurate, except for three cases (pp. 15, 52, and 103).

Apart from the above minor mishaps, this fluent, well-written, and very cautious work is a useful addition to the bookshelf of any student and teacher of Islam, regardless of their faith. This endeavor to treat Islam and the Qur'an fairly should be welcomed, especially when done by a scholar of

Peters' status. He maintains an efficient tone throughout the book, almost without disclosing his personal, religious, or political convictions.

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