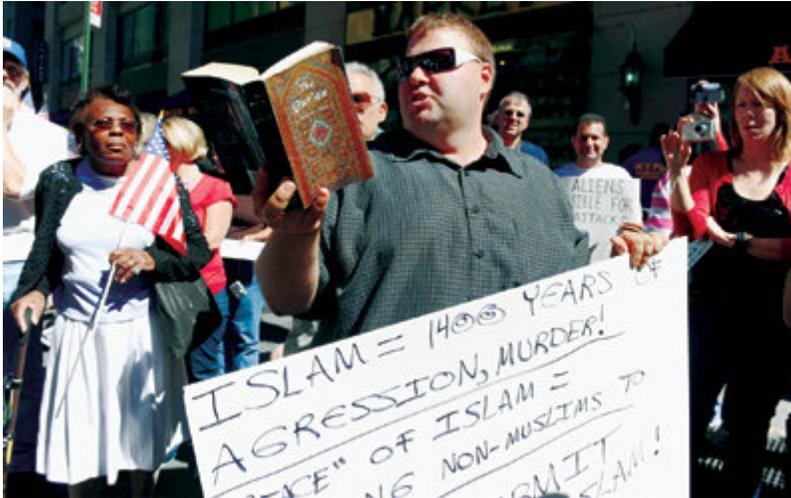


The Anniston Star

What religious book mentions Jesus more than 100 times? The Quran

By Brett Buckner
Sep 18, 2010



A man protesting against a project to build an Islamic center near Ground Zero, where the World Trade Center twin towers stood, holds a copy of the Quran near the planned construction site in New York on Sept. 11. A recent Pew Forum for Religion & Public Life poll indicated that the majority of respondents had little or no knowledge of the Muslim faith at all. Photo: Associated Press

Two months ago, he was an obscure pastor leading a small congregation in Florida. That was before Terry Jones, pastor of Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, created a global firestorm by declaring Sept. 11 "International Burn a Koran Day." It's a threat Jones has since abandoned amid pleas and outrage from not only the Muslim world but people of all faiths.

"Muslims take the value of the Quran very seriously as divine scripture, and we are very careful to handle it and store it properly," explained Safaa Al-Hamdani, a member of the Anniston Islamic Center. "It is never allowed to be kept in unsanitary places, is never allowed to touch the ground, and we must have clean hands to touch it.

"I cannot emphasize enough the value of this book to all Muslims."

And yet Jones appeared oblivious as to why his threats were so offensive. The reason? Jones knew nothing about the Quran.

"I have no experience with it whatsoever," he told the New York Times. "I only know what the Bible says."

Jones' ignorance about the teachings and beliefs of Islam is not uncommon. More than half of

respondents in a recent poll by the Pew Forum for Religion & Public Life said they knew little or nothing about the Muslim faith.

Had Jones or any of his followers bothered to read the Quran before threatening to burn it, they might have been surprised by what they found.

Moses is mentioned more than 130 times. Jesus is mentioned more than 100 times. Mary is mentioned more in the Quran than in the New Testament, and Muhammad is only mentioned four times, explained Gordon Newby, chair of Middle Eastern and South Asian studies at Emory University in Atlanta.

A new exhibit, "Islamic Calligraphy and the Quran," is on view through Dec. 5 at the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory. In conjunction with the exhibit, Newby has lectured on the relationship of the Quran to Jewish and Christian scriptures.

"The Quran," he said, "is the latest book to join the monotheistic dialogue on the nature of God and God's word."

The Quran is about as long as the New Testament, consisting of 114 chapters, or suras, which vary in length from three verses to 286.

"The best way for newcomers to read the Quran is not from front to back, but back to front," wrote Stephen Prothero, author of *ITAL Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't*. UNITAL "Start with the Al-Fatiha (The Opening), but then skip to the shorter, more theological suras in the back. Then read the narratives of the prophets (toward the middle) before concluding with the legalistic content of the longer suras in the front."

Muslims believe that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures were both revealed by God but have been corrupted over time, while the Quran exists today as it was originally delivered. Translations are viewed as human products. Only the original Arabic versions of the Quran are considered authoritative.

"The Quran teaches the bodily resurrection and a coming judgment," Prothero wrote. "It requires prayers and almsgiving and fasting and pilgrimage. It portrays a world in which one God repeatedly reveals his will to human beings through prophets and messages that stretch from Moses to Jesus to Muhammad."

The Quran takes many of the biblical stories and uses them to teach how God wants human beings to act before the day of judgment to avoid being cast into hell, Newby said.

"Be faithful to God, perform charity, do good works, and you'll be OK," he said. "I know a lot of preachers who deliver pretty much that same message every week from the pulpit, as well as priests, rabbis and imams."

A brief history of the Quran

"Islam" means surrender or submission to the will of Allah (God).

Newest among the world's major religions and with more than 1 billion followers, Islam is based on the simplest of creeds. Murmured in the ear of newborns and the last whisper of the dying, that creed rings in a single sentence: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his prophet."

Followers of Islam, or Muslims (the word in Arabic means "one who submits"), revere Muhammad as the greatest prophet who ever lived, the last of God's messengers. Muslims honor him and the prophets who preceded him – Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus – as human, not divine. Allah rules alone. Muhammad's role was to bring an absolute and final revelation - the Quran.

The Arabian desert was home to wandering tribes who worshipped nature spirits and made pilgrimages to a cube-shaped shrine in Mecca that housed scores of idols. It was into this prosperous crossroads that Muhammad was born around the year 570.

Little is known about his childhood, except that he was known a hard-worker, earning the nickname of al-Amin, "the trustworthy."

Because of this reputation, the 25-year-old Muhammad married a rich widow named Khadijah, who was 15 years his senior. The marriage gave him four daughters, and time to ponder questions that burdened his soul.

Over the years, Muhammad's tribe had become wealthy, as Mecca grew into a thriving mercantile city. They were obsessed with attaining greater wealth, rather than protecting the poorer and weaker members of the tribe.

Muhammad also worried that a spiritual crisis was gripping the region. While Christianity and Judaism were familiar religions, the nomads worshiped numerous pagan gods and had no prophets or scriptures of their own.

"Indeed, the Jews and Christians whom they met often taunted the Arabs for being left out of the divine plan," wrote Karen Armstrong in *ITALIslam: A Short History*. UNITAL

"It seemed to many of the more thoughtful people in Arabia that the Arabs were a lost people, exiled forever from the civilized world and ignored by God himself."

That changed in 610, when Muhammad stepped into a cave on Mount Hira, three miles from Mecca. While in the midst of prayer and a ritual fast, Muhammad felt overpowered by the angel Gabriel, who gripped him tightly, forcing the first fragments of the Quran to pour from his mouth.

Inspired by his own vision and his wife's steadfast support, Muhammad eagerly awaited further visitations. He often went to Hira. He meditated. He prayed. He waited. More than two years passed before Muhammad again heard a heavenly voice and saw Gabriel seated upon a throne.

From that moment forward, he never faltered as the revelations were delivered verse by verse – surah by surah - over 21 years. Such experiences were painful for Muhammad, who often told confidants, "Never once did I receive a revelation without feeling that my soul had been torn away from me."

The 'maniac poet'

Initially, converts were few, but, with growing confidence, Muhammad attracted larger audiences drawn by the promise of an afterlife.

In paganism, death was the end of existence, thus attaining wealth was the ultimate goal in life. But the Quran taught that the rich must share with the poor, and promised a glorious afterlife for the righteous and hellfire for the sinful. This threatened the powerful upper-class leaders, who turned against the “driveller, star-gazer and maniac-poet.” They stoned and beat converts.

In September of 622, Muhammad obeyed a vision telling him to leave Mecca for Yathrib, an oasis city some 250 miles north. This migration marks the beginning of the Muslim era. Islam grew in political power as Yathrib became Madinat al-Nabi, “the city of the Prophet,” or simply, Medina.

In January 630, Muhammad marched on Mecca with a force of 10,000 and was met with little resistance. On camelback, Muhammad made seven trips around the Kaaba, which housed the various pagan gods, ordered all its idols destroyed and rededicated the shrine to “Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.”

Victory at Mecca set a model of leniency followed by later Islamic conquerors that allowed pagans to embrace Islam. Christians and Jews could maintain their own faiths – if they paid a tax – having received valid revelations of their own.

“The Quran insists strongly that ‘there shall be no coercion in matters of faith,’” Armstrong wrote, “and commands Muslims to respect the beliefs of Jews and Christians, whom the Quran calls ahl al-kigab, a phrase usually translated ‘People of the Book,’ but which is more accurately rendered ‘people of an earlier revelation.’”

Not long after conquering Mecca, Muhammad’s ministry came to an end. From a hill near Mecca, he faced a throng of pilgrims and preached his final revelation. “This day (God has) perfected your religion for you ... and has chosen for you ... Islam.”

One morning in 632, Muhammad died peacefully in the arms of his wife. When Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad’s closest companions, learned of the prophet’s death, he called followers together.

“O men,” he said, “if anyone worships Muhammad, let him know now that Muhammad is dead. But if anyone worships God, let him know that God is alive and immortal forever.”