

Preface

As the sacred text of Islam, the Qur'an is one of the most influential books in history. Since it first appeared in the seventh century C.E., Muslims have turned to it for spiritual, moral, and practical guidance on how to live their lives. It has been translated into many languages, and it has been the focus of countless books, articles, essays, websites, and blog postings. The attitudes toward the Qur'an in these writings have varied widely, running the gamut from celebrating it as the word of God to denigrating it as a manual for breeding terrorists. Unfortunately, though they present a distorted or incomplete reading of the Qur'an, many of the latter characterizations of the text are often widely disseminated and popular among non-Muslims. Despite its influence and widespread presence, and on account of such common misperceptions, the Qur'an remains a largely unknown and mysterious book to non-Muslims. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2009 found that almost one-half of Americans were unable to identify the Qur'an as the Islamic equivalent to the Bible. In addition, only about 40 percent of us could both identify the Qur'an and knew that Allah is the term Muslims use to refer to God. If so many Americans are incapable of naming Islam's scripture, it stands to reason that many more, likely the vast majority of us, have no idea what is written on its pages. And yet, you would be hard-pressed to find an American who doesn't have an opinion about the Qur'an.

That is a troubling and dangerous situation. How can we be so ill-informed about the book that is at the heart of one of the world's great religions? And how can that ignorance be overcome? This book attempts to respond to the second question by introducing the reader to what the Qur'an has to say about a number of themes. It does not offer a comprehensive treatment of the Qur'an's contents but presents a summary of its teachings on selected topics that were chosen because of their importance for Muslims and their relevance for the modern world. After an introduction that explains what the Qur'an is, how it is studied, and how it is experienced by Muslims, the next seven chapters treat the following themes in order: the natural environment, the family, gender and

sexuality, Muslim/non-Muslim relations, *jihād*, violence and war, and death and the afterlife. Other topics undoubtedly could be added to this list, but these have been selected because they provide an overview of the Qur'an's perspective on human existence and what it means to be a Muslim. In addition, some of these topics are among the most hotly debated and controversial issues being discussed around the world today.

Some features have been included in the book to make it more user-friendly and to facilitate its use in the classroom or in small-group settings. Each chapter begins with an outline of its contents that orients the reader to what lies ahead. Textboxes that call attention to key concepts or comment on things mentioned in the main text are interspersed throughout each chapter, and in a few places, maps and timelines provide visual aids to matters under discussion. A number of photos are provided throughout the book and in a gallery that contains full-color images, including many of the Qur'an.

Each chapter concludes with a listing of the key terms found within it. Most of these terms are Arabic words that have been transliterated into English, and a glossary containing all of them with their definitions is found at the end of the book. A set of suggested readings for further study and a list of questions to initiate discussion and conversation also appear at the end of each chapter. The book's companion website (www.fortresspress.com/kaltner) provides a number of additional resources, including instructional materials that will prove useful to both instructors and students. It also contains the glossary of Arabic terms with audio samples of how they are pronounced.

The issues treated in this volume will be addressed and debated by many in the years ahead. Muslims will be vocal and valued participants in that conversation, and many of their views will be informed by what their sacred text teaches. Non-Muslims must therefore make every effort to become familiar with the Qur'an if they wish to be effective dialogue partners in the quest to make the world a better place. If this book is able to facilitate that process in any way, it will have served its purpose.