Criticizing the Koran


"Islam and Islamic values," cautioned historian Bernard Lewis in 2008, "have a level of immunity from comment and criticism in the Western world that Christianity has lost and Judaism has never had." A latecomer to the trend of interpreting religious texts apart from—and even hostile to—their religious traditions, the critical study of Islam has only become more difficult in the last two decades. Besides the threat of Islamist violence, vast amounts of wealth flow from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Qatar into Western institutions of higher learning, with not just strings but ropes attached—for us in the West to hang ourselves. British universities, for example, have received more than £233.5 million over a period of 14 years from some of the worst Islamic dictatorships in the world, a shameful betrayal of the universities' noble dedication to the independent pursuit of knowledge. The resulting, all-too predictable, acts of academic self-censorship only underline the importance of works like Ibn Warraq's Christmas in the Koran.

Warraq, the vice-president of the World Encounter Institute, has never been one to be cowed by academic or religious intimidation. His first book, Why I Am Not a Muslim (1995), was a passionate wake-up call to the West. Calling it his "war effort," Warraq warned of the dangers of political Islam's incessant demands for more and more concessions from an enfeebled civilization, whose broadly liberal values are incompatible with Islamic Law's totalitarianism. Why I Am Not a Muslim was scholarship with a sledgehammer, a stinging polemic against radical Islam and its western enablers. Since then, his work has moved in two increasingly scholarly directions: on the one hand, anthologies of Koranic Criticism, such as What the Koran Really Says (2002), and, on the other, a defense of Western civilization, exemplified in works such as Defending the West (2007) and Why the West Is Best (2011). In their own way, these scholarly endeavors both further and deepen Warraq's war effort.

The title Christmas in the Koran alludes to Surah 97:1, traditionally understood as proclaiming the advent of the Koran, but which instead must refer to the coming of Jesus, one of many surprising reinterpretations discussed in this volume. The book is a collection of both past and present Koranic criticism focusing on Christopher Luxenberg's ground-breaking work in Syriac and Arabic linguistics. Don't let this description fool you: this is no bloodless academic tome. The meticulous studies collected in here call into serious question many traditional Islamic assumptions, including the typical account of the Koran's compilation. Far from being revelation fallen from heaven, the Islamic scripture has human fingerprints all over it—and none of them belong to a single individual called "Muhammad" (not a personal name, we learn, but a title reflecting the Christian Paraclete). The original focus of worship was Bakka, not Mecca, and, contra the official party line, the two are not alternate names for the same site. Islam, argues Warraq, derives not from a revolutionary repudiation of pagan polytheism, but from an internecine struggle within Eastern Christianity. Christmas in the Koran begins with an introduction by Warraq on language and language mixing, with a focus on the Semitic languages. He describes how Classical Arabic was derived from the vernaculars, how the Koran is not written in Classical Arabic, and how studies of the general Aramaic background to the New Testament gospels help to unravel some of the obscurities of the Koran's language. Sidney Griffith follows with an essay on the Syriacisms in the Koran, while Robert Kerr offers a long article on the significance of Aramaisms in the Koran, arguing forcefully that, had the Koran really been written and compiled in the area of the Hijaz—modern western Saudi Arabia containing the cities of Mecca and Medina—as many believers hold, it would have been written in the South Arabian script "which unambiguously differentiates each of the twenty-eight phonemes of Arabic." It wasn't.

The focus of this immense volume is undoubtedly the work of Christopher Luxenberg, who came to the general public's attention with his argument that the passages in the Koran that have most often been translated as "wide-eyed huris" or "wide-eyed damsels" (e.g., chapter 52, verse 20) were in fact mistranslations for "white raisins." Martyrs will likely be disappointed to discover a nice box of Sun-Maid awaiting them in Paradise. Luxenberg took an Arabic word in the Koran that makes no sense in context and translated it back
The depth of the current scholarship found in this book is impressive; the collection and translation of previous scholarly works is no less so. Several of the essays refer to both Adolf Harnack and Hans Joachim Schoeps, so it is fitting and convenient to find both of them translated here into English for the first time. Harnack points out that Gnostic Judeo-Christianity displays profound parallels with Islam, especially with one of its specific varieties, the Elkasites. He concludes that “Islam is a transformation of the Jewish religion, which itself had already been transformed by Gnostic Christianity, on an Arabic foundation by a great prophet.” Schoeps looks to Islam’s Ebionite elements.

Particularly important are Elisabeth Puin’s elegant translations of six of Anton Baumstark’s essays from a very difficult German original. Baumstark, an Orientalist and philologist whose major works were written nearly a century ago, is responsible for many of the most insightful claims regarding the Koran’s roots in Christian and Jewish liturgy. In one essay, he argues for the existence of a pre-Islamic ecclesiastical Christian literature in Arabic. In another, he contends that Ibn Ishaq, in his life of Muhammad, must have had access to an Arabic Gospel text written in pre-Islamic times, and based on an Old-Syriac text. In yet another, he traces the connection of the latter text to Tatian’s Diatessaron, a Gospel paraphrase or “harmony” written in Syriac in the 2nd century. Baumstark looks to ancient Jewish liturgical prayers for the origins of parts of the Islamic creed formula.

Warraq credits Baruch Spinoza’s 17th-century Theological-Political Treatise with single-handedly launching the European Enlightenment project, thereby helping to bring about a diminution of religious fanaticism and the eventual secularization of European society. However problematic Spinoza’s pursuit was, Warraq’s scholarly work is a well-meaning continuation of sorts. True to the historian’s method, Warraq most definitely does not simply believe whatever his sources tell him. He wants to apply genuine critical scrutiny to the Koran by retaining scholarly independence in the face of closed-minded faith.

Christmas in the Koran is a rich collection of articles that are sure to challenge the traditional interpretations of the Koran and its redaction. It is regrettable that there is no general index, or an index of passages cited from the Koran. Though some of the articles are highly technical, most are accessible to the diligent general reader. Ibn Warraq provides an exhilarating intellectual ride in the world of Biblical and Koranic Studies.