Anti-Muslim video – one more reason for independent scholarship on the Quran

Interest in the Quran has risen dramatically. Yet no independent association for Quranic study exists in the US – nothing like the Society of Biblical Literature, for instance. That will soon change, and as violent protests over an anti-Muslim video show, the need for scholarly insight is great.

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In 1726, when the Ottoman Empire promulgated a fatwa – a legal declaration – permitting the printing of books, the Quran was excluded. Textbooks, novels, and military manuals soon began to be printed in the Middle East, but the Quran continued to be copied by hand. The reason was religious: Pious scholars argued that printing would be a sort of disrespect to the Quran, a text which – according to traditional Islamic teaching – is the very word of God brought down from heaven by the angel Gabriel.

Since that time, religious opinions have changed. Today the Quran is printed at an extraordinary rate. The King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an (the official Saudi Quranic printing press) produces over 10 million copies per year. And interest in the study of the Quran has risen dramatically: The number of institutes, conferences, and publications dedicated to the Quran in the Islamic world has increased, and new websites have multiplied.

Interest has also grown sharply in the West, including in the United States. In recent years, 21 new English translations have been published. Yet no independent academic association dedicated to Quranic studies exists in the US – nothing similar to, for instance, the Society of Biblical Literature, the American Historical Association, or the Modern Language Association.

Now, thanks to a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, the Society of Biblical Literature is working to set up the International Qur’anic Studies Association – not to influence it, merely to provide an incubator for it.

There is a tremendous need for such a group, not only for scholars and specialists, but also for the general public. Good scholarship leads to understanding, and understanding leads to respect. In the world today respect between religious groups, and for religious groups, is sorely needed. That’s abundantly clear in the latest wave of violence entangling the Muslim and Western worlds over an anti-Muslim video.
Scholars of the Bible have already begun to appreciate the importance of Islam’s holy book to their work. The Quran – which emerged from the heart of the Middle East in the seventh century – is a text in close conversation with Biblical tradition. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mary are all central characters in the Quran.

Moreover, the Quran’s theological message – and in particular its commentaries on Christian doctrine – suggests it is an important source for knowledge of religious history.

The formation of this organization will provide a quickly growing group of scholars with an easily accessible forum to share insights on the history and meaning of the Quran. They can publicize new discoveries in archaeology, manuscript studies, and linguistics that will deepen the understanding of the holy scripture of Islam. These discussions will help advance Quranic studies – recently described as an academic field in “utmost disarray” – both in the US and around the world.

Indeed, the field is marked by astounding divisions of opinion. Scholars disagree not only over fine points of theological interpretation, but even over the definition of the Quran’s Arabic words. One example is the word míṣr. When the Quran has God tell the Israelites (Q 2:61), “Go down to a míṣr,” some scholars argue it means “Go down to any town.” Others insist it means, “Go down to Egypt.”

Some Muslims may have reservations about this project taking place in the West, or subjecting their sacred scripture to the tools of academic inquiry at all. In the Islamic world, work on the Quran is often scrutinized by religious authorities, and any scholarship on the Quran in the West is often assumed to be the sort of Orientalism that is necessarily hostile to Islam.

The work of the International Qur’anic Studies Association, however, is intended to show that academic inquiry is inherently an act of deep respect for the subject. Indeed the academic work of our organization will in part be inspired by Islamic tradition itself.

Many classical Muslim interpreters and philologists who studied the Quran used the tools of academic inquiry during their day. They investigated questions such as foreign words, and turned to Jewish and Christian traditions to explain Quranic passages, such as that on the Golden Calf or the birth of Mary, mother of Jesus. In this way the International Qur’anic Studies Association will build upon the rich legacy of Islamic scholarship.

As codirectors of this new learned society, we can assure skeptics that all scholars will be invited to add their voice to it. The society will be committed to publishing the kinds of research that contribute original insights. Many of these insights will come from a younger generation of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike who possess the intellectual curiosity and interdisciplinary tools necessary to make meaningful discoveries.

The organization itself, however, will not support any particular scholarly opinion concerning the Quran – no matter how traditional or revisionist in nature. In fact, the International Qur’anic Studies Association will be particularly committed to encouraging exchanges between scholars in the Islamic world and the West. Therefore, the society will publish a
bilingual English-Arabic journal.

Just as the case of printing-vs.-writing the Quran showed, thinking evolves over time and inquiry assists that process. The Society of Biblical Literature helped advance views on race and women’s rights in America. The American Historical Association contributed to the preservation and appreciation of Native American cultures. The International Qur’anic Studies Association has the potential to build bridges between adherents of the Abrahamic faiths.

We can’t say now exactly what the contribution of the association will be. But if its members do the work they love, it will advance our understanding of the holy text of Islam and contribute to the understanding that leads to peace.

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