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SPECIAL PROJECTS

RETURN TO THE
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Understanding Islam

Understanding Islam is a reading and discussion program which offers the general reader an opportunity to explore the roots of Islam and some of the most important issues facing Muslims today. Through four meetings devoted to a range of topics, the program presents a picture of the Muslim world and its intellectual, cultural and religious dimensions.

The series begins where the tradition itself does, with the career of Muhammad and the revelation of the Qur'an. The themes discussed in this first session echo throughout the remainder of our meetings. The model of the Prophet and the monotheist values which he taught inform discussions of literature (Session 2), the place of women in the household and in society at large (Session 3), and politics and society (Session 4).

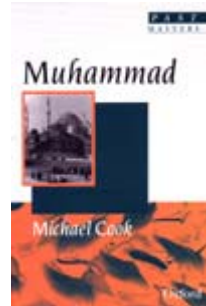
Through readings, lectures, and discussions, *Understanding Islam* provides a sympathetic yet critical understanding of some of the crucial challenges facing the Muslim world in the 21st century.

Libraries may apply for a library reading and discussion grant to help fund *Understanding Islam* program or simply borrow the books to run the program on their own.

The Readings:

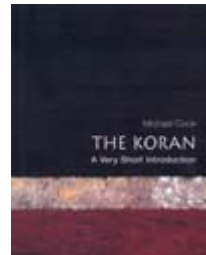
Session I: Mohammad and the Koran

Michael A. Cook, *Muhammad*



Just over a sixth of the world's population subscribes to the Muslim belief that "there is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger." Michael Cook gives an incisive account of the man who inspired this faith, drawing on the traditional Muslim sources to describe Muhammad's life and teaching. He also attempts to stand back from this traditional picture to question how far it is historically justified. (Oxford University Press, 92 pages.)

Michael A. Cook, *The Koran, A Very Short Introduction*



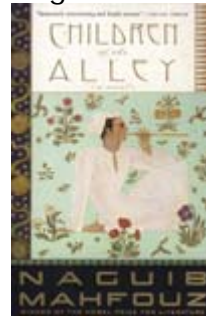
core of identity and continuity for a religious tradition that is now in its fifteenth century. In this *Very Short Introduction*, Michael Cook provides a lucid and direct account of the significance of the Koran both in the modern world and in that of traditional Islam. He gives

The Koran has constituted a remarkably resilient core of vivid accounts of the Koran's role in Muslim civilization, illustrates the diversity of interpretations championed by traditional and modern commentators, discusses the processes by which the book took shape, and compares it to other scriptures and classics of the historic cultures of Eurasia. (Oxford University Press, 144 pages.)

Plus selected chapters from the Qur'an (to be chosen by the discussion leader).

Session II: Islam and Literature

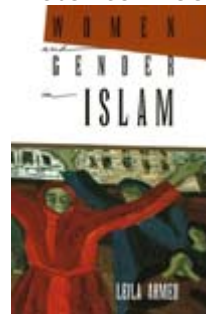
Naguib Mahfouz, *Children of the Alley*



Mahfouz is the most celebrated novelist writing in Arabic and a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature (1988). In 1959, *Children of Gebelawi* was serialized in the newspaper al-Ahram. The uproar caused by the story was akin to the more recent reaction to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, and delayed its publication in book form until many years later, after Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize. In 1994, Mahfouz survived an assassination attempt. Told as the history of a Cairo alley, *Children of the Alley* (as our edition is called) is an extended parable, retelling the lives of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, and dealing boldly with the modern idea of the "death of God." The novel can be read on many levels. On the surface, it is an evocative account of an Egypt that has all but vanished. At a deeper level, the book provides valuable insight into a modern Muslim's view of the prophets by putting them into a familiar context. At still deeper level, Mahfouz gently mocks the patriarchal authoritarianism of the second level. A pervasive theme is the use of violence by and against tyrants, which makes the book eerily topical. (Bantam, 448 pages.)

Session III: Women in Islam

Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*

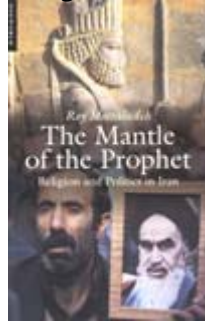


A "wonderfully iconoclastic" history of ideas about Muslim women. Cheerfully debunking every stereotype American readers have about women in the Islamic heartland, Ahmed weaves together theological and literary sources, statistics and travelers' tales, to create a complex and even-handed narrative. Her focus is on the development of ideas rather than the physical details of women's lives, yet many individual women stand out. Whether she is identifying the cultural influences which led early Islam toward misogyny and away from egalitarianism or showing how Muslim modernizers were influenced by colonial European

racism, her writing is sophisticated and graceful. Leila Ahmed is Professor of Women's Studies in Religion at the Harvard Divinity School. (Yale University Press, 246 pages.)

Session IV: Islam and Politics

Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*



First published fifteen years ago, Roy Mottahedeh's intriguing portrait of Iranian society and the lives of those who lived through the revolution remains as relevant today as it was then. The story of a young mullah growing up in the ancient and sacred city of Qom, this is not just a fascinating study of life in post-Khomeini Iran, but a striking survey of Muslim, Persian, and Shi'ite culture from the Middle Ages to today, told in an engaging and vivid novelistic form. Roy Mottahedeh is Professor of Islamic History at Harvard University (One World Publishers, 384 pages.)

How the program works:

Understanding Islam is a four-part reading and discussion program offered free of charge through public libraries and other community organizations. A program brings together 20-30 readers for four discussion sessions scheduled two weeks apart. Each session focuses on a different book.

Participants sign up in advance at the library or other host institution. About three weeks before the first session, the first book in the series is distributed. (If you wish you may purchase your own copies of the books. They all are available in paperback and each would be a worthwhile addition to your personal library.) Participants take the book home, read it and return on the appointed evening for a brief presentation and open discussion with an expert in the field.

At the end of the session, you return the book you have just read and receive the next book in the series. You return three weeks later to discuss the second book, and so on until the series is completed. Sometimes you may not be able to finish one of the books, but you should plan to attend the discussion anyway. You will still get a lot out of it — all of the books address issues about which you probably have informed opinions — and you will be ready to receive the next book in the series.

Enjoy yourself! A reading and discussion program is a social as well as an educational experience. *Understanding Islam* is an opportunity for an extended conversation among thoughtful people who live in the same community and share a common interest in its future.

Libraries who held UI programs

Acton Memorial Library
Amesbury Public Library
Berkshire Athenaeum
Boston Public Library - Faneuil Branch
Boston Public Library - North End Branch
Chicopee Public Library
Fall River Public Library
Holbrook Public Library
Leominster Public Library
Lucius Beebe Memorial Library, Wakefield
Malden Public Library
Medford Public Library
Peabody Institute Library
Samuel S. Pollard Memorial Library, Lowell
Scituate Town Library
Sharon Public Library
Somerville Public Library – West Branch
Thomas Crane Public Library
Wellesley Free Library
Westfield Athenaeum
Worcester Public Library

If you are interested in hosting *Understanding Islam*, contact [Hayley Wood](#).

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