

# Required reading: The UNC Qur'an debate

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Conservative christian activists have often been unwise or shortsighted in pushing their moral and religious claims in the public square, but their efforts have reminded secular folk that religious belief is decisive for individuals, institutions and societies. They have persuasively made the case that the constitutional disestablishment of religion does not mean the establishment of irreligion. A free society is one that accommodates religious expression in the public sphere, not one that disallows it.

Against this background, it was regrettable to see a conservative Christian group, the Family Policy Network, lodge a legal protest against the University of North Carolina for asking incoming students to read a book on the Qur'an. Regrettable and ironic, since the FPN has been a primary booster of a recently enacted Virginia law that requires public schools to display signs with the words "In God We Trust." Apparently the FPN thinks public schools should express their belief in God but not actually foster any discussion of God.

The FPN worried that the UNC assignment was "indoctrinating" students in Islam. One suspects the FPN has an exaggerated sense of what a single college reading assignment can accomplish. A more interesting, if still unpersuasive, complaint was that the book chosen for discussion, Michael Sells's *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*, "whitewashes" Islam by glossing over those parts of the Qur'an that endorse violence toward unbelievers. It's true that Sells's explicit aim is to offer a sympathetic version of Islam so as to help non-Muslims get a sense of what it is like to regard the Qur'an as a beautiful, inspiring, world-shaping text. For that reason, Sells focuses on the "early revelations," which speak more directly to personal issues of faith than do the later polemical writings in the Qur'an, which deal with political and legal issues that confronted Muhammad later in life.

The FPN's notion that this kind of approach is a whitewash simply doesn't wash. One need only consider the analogous effort to introduce Christianity by discussing a

biblical text: one would probably not choose to begin with the books of Judges and Kings. The reason would be not that one wants to hide passages that endorse violence and holy war, but that those texts are a complicated arrangement of historical and political materials foreign to the modern reader, and they do not convey the heart of faith the way readings from Genesis, the prophets or the Gospels would.

That a state university did not regard a religious text as off limits for required study is a small sign that the public sphere is open to religious issues. Perhaps in some future year, school officials will consider asking students to read an introduction to the Bible, on the assumption that knowing something about Christianity is also part of being an educated person. No doubt the choice of texts in that case would also be controversial in some quarters, including with the Family Policy Network. But that's no reason to abandon a good idea.