



## **ONE WORLD: UNC prof's book delves into many-sided Islam**

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### CHAPEL HILL

At 7 a.m. on a spring morning, Carl W. Ernst was nudged from his sleep by a long-distance phone call. The woman on the line asked if he would accept the Bashrahil Prize for Outstanding Cultural Achievement in the Humanities.

"The what prize?" Ernst asked.

The Bashrahil Prize, the woman said.

Ernst had never heard of it, but he was honored that the Arab cultural organization in Cairo had seen fit to recognize his book, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. Once he was fully awake, he was more than pleasantly surprised to learn that it came with a \$30,000 cash award.

In fact, for Ernst, a specialist in Islamic studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the prize was both an honor and a vindication.

Two years ago, his recommendation of a book of Quranic verses for the university's summer-reading assignment set off a maelstrom of criticism and a lawsuit. Angry state legislators found the book an offensive choice one year after the Sept. 11 attacks. A court allowed the summer reading program to go on, and under the glare of MTV camera crews students read and discussed *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*, by Michael Sells.

But for Ernst that was just the first battle. At the same time that the university announced its reading selection, Ernst's publisher informed him that it was no longer interested in the manuscript he had just delivered. Some editors, it turned out, didn't want to be associated with a book that cast a sympathetic light on Islam. (He will not identify the publishing house.)

The two events confirmed the major thrust of Ernst's then-unpublished book - that the debate about Islam in America is laden with bias. It was time to explore the colonialist roots of prejudice against Islam and show that, though some Muslims have violent ambitions, the faith's adherents are far from monolithic.

The book, which was eventually published by the University of North Carolina Press, did just that and won glowing reviews for a clear and balanced approach suitable for first-time students of Islam. It will be released in paperback this month.

"Yes," Ernst acknowledged, the prize was, in a sense, a vindication. "But I'd like to see it as defending the understanding of the humanities as truly international and including Islamic culture alongside other civilizations," he said.

For Ernst, a 53-year-old Harvard-trained professor, it also showed that his work was being

acknowledged abroad. The Bashrahil Prize - established by a Saudi Arabian philanthropist and awarded this year for the first time - recognizes literary creativity in the Arab world.

Ernst, who is not a Muslim, was the only American among eight winners chosen this year. Others included Amre Moussa, the secretary general of the Arab League, and Adonis, considered the foremost living poet in the Arabic language.

"This is a huge, huge deal," said Omid Safi, a professor of Islamic studies at Colgate University and a former student of Ernst's. "It tells you the kind of respect he's getting in the Muslim world."

The awards ceremony at a Cairo Sheraton was a formal affair. Organizers, expecting Ernst to deliver his acceptance speech in English, provided a translator. But Ernst surprised his listeners by accepting the award in Arabic - a gesture, he said, that was only common courtesy given that the prize was established to recognize contributions in Arab language and culture.

During his two-week stay in Egypt - his first - he met ordinary Muslims who thanked him for his writings.

"They're so concerned and upset by what they perceive as the government and the press identifying all Muslims as terrorists," Ernst said. "People from all walks of life came up to me and expressed their gratification that there was somebody trying to talk about Muslims as human beings in the United States."

In his book, a kind of primer on Islam, Ernst shows that the Muslim world is not exclusively Arab. In fact, 82 percent of all Muslims are non-Arab, with the majority being South and Southeast Asians. In addition, he says, it is a mistake to think that the world's 50 Muslim-majority countries form a contained region.

"Even people who plow by water buffalo or drive horse carts today are part of the contemporary world - and in their village there may be a television on which they watch MTV," he writes in his book.

Ernst opposes the view that there is a "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West, a theory that he thinks is rooted in colonial doctrines of European supremacy. That kind of mentality, he added, will only breed more violence.

He writes that throughout history there have been multiple ways of following Muhammad. Fundamentalists may try to strip the faith of local traditions, poetry and art in an effort to re-create seventh-century Arabia. But Muslims have interpreted their faith differently depending on where they lived.

Ernst, a native of Los Angeles who was attracted to Islamic studies by way of its mystical traditions, built his academic reputation on his expertise in Sufism. In *Following Muhammad*, he takes on broader themes, including political science, history and philosophy. He has recently signed contracts to translate the book into Korean and Indonesian. French, Turkish, Persian and Arabic translations are also in the works.

Underlying his scholarship, colleagues say, is a concern for the humanities. (The book, says Ebrahim Moosa, a professor of Islamic studies at Duke University, encourages "intercultural dialogue" because it seeks to show how interdependent the world really is.)

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