

Bible scholars back more critical studies of Qur'an

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The Society of Biblical Literature, the largest international body of scholars of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and related texts, hopes to assist experts on the Qur'an in creating an independent body for fostering research on Islam's holiest book.

The SBL announced May 29 that it was awarded a \$140,000 grant from the Henry Luce Foundation to provide travel expenses, meeting space and other assistance over a three-year period, allowing scholars to explore creation of such a network.

"It cannot be overstated that the agenda of the scholars in this consultation will not be directed by the SBL," said John Kutsko, executive director of the Atlanta-based biblical society. The guidelines aim to allow scholars "to set their own research and publishing agendas" that may transcend institutional and international lines, he said.

"The level of interest in the Qur'an and Islam in the West today is unprecedented," said Emran El-Badawi, assistant professor of Arab studies at the University of Houston and codirector of the consultation. Although a growing number of websites and online forums discuss the meaning and interpretation of the Qur'an, "no learned society dedicated to the study of the Qur'an exists," El-Badawi said.

The envisioned Society for Qur'anic Studies would encourage scholars of various perspectives to present "cutting edge research on the Qur'an's language, its dialogue with other scriptures and the context in which the text arose," said the other codirector, Gabriel Said Reynolds, an associate professor of Islamic studies and theology at the University of Notre Dame.

"By approaching the Qur'an as a historical, literary and religious text," Reynolds said, the society will demonstrate the "wide-ranging scholarly value of the Qur'an."

The first formal meeting of the ten-member steering committee will take place in Chicago in mid-November during the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical

Literature and the American Academy of Religion.