***Koran by Heart* (2011)**
Directed by Greg Barker
Produced by HBO Documentaries, Julie Goldman,
John Battsek, Greg Barker, and David Grabias

Introductory Essay and Viewing Considerations
By Frederick M. Denny

Koran by Heart introduces the very soul of Islam as a living scriptural discourse that has sustained Muslims since the Islamic faith was founded by the Arabian prophet Muhammad in the seventh century CE.

The Arabic word *qur'ān* (often transliterated as "Koran" in English) means "recitation." The Qur'an is regarded by Muslims as God's very words as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel. The Arabic Qur'anic revelations were eventually transcribed into a written text, but Muslims believe that their meaning and power reside in and are most authentically experienced in live recitation. The strict performance standards can be traced back to the Prophet himself and his close circle of devout supporters as the religion of Islam was in its earliest phases.

The Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad from 610 CE, the year that marks the beginning of his vocation as the prophet of the new religion, until 632 CE, the year of his passing. The continuing revelations of the oral text are known as recitations, as is the entire body of the complete scripture.

The Qur'an was brought into an organized written textual form after Muhammad's death by loyal followers who had heard the recitations directly from him. The format of the written Qur'anic text is not itself a revealed matter, but became a convention among the Muslim community as it grew and developed. There are 114 chapters, called sūras, which are arranged by length, from longest to shortest. The first sūra, titled "al-Fātiha" ("The Opening"), is a brief prayer that is parallel to the Lord's Prayer in Christianity for its centrality in both personal and public devotion. Following is "The Opening" in English translation:

> In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.
> Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all beings,
> The Beneficent, the Merciful. Master of the Day of Judgment,
> You alone we worship, You alone we ask for help. Guide us on the straight path,
> The path of those to whom You have been gracious,
> Not of those with whom You are incensed nor those who are straying.

The first line of the prayer is an invocation called the Basmala: "Bi'smillāhi'r-Rahmāni'r-Rahīm" ("In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful"). The Basmala is spoken frequently by Muslims: before reciting the Qur'an, before making a speech, before taking meals, before conjugal relations, and in other contexts as well.

The sūras fall into two basic categories. The first are recitations revealed in Mecca before the Hijra ("emigration") of Muhammad and his fellow Muslims north to Medina in 622. The second are those revealed in Medina, where the Muslim community (*Umma*) was fully formed and its doctrines and laws clearly delineated, before the new religion returned to Mecca as its center. Reflecting Islam's growing numbers and increasingly credible claim to be a world religion (with adherents from North Africa deep into Asia), the sūras revealed in Medina are longer, and address legal and social matters that would enable the Prophet and his closest followers to guide the *Umma* in a new way of life with a strong legal foundation based on divine revelation.

The Qur'an is quite different in shape, format, and content from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament of the Christian people, both of which include extensive historical, biographical, legal, ethical, doctrinal, devotional, and descriptive material telling of the two religions' origins and developments in the lands bordering the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Although the Qur'an does not include content of this kind, it does refer to many of the same persons found in the earlier holy books, respectfully depicting such figures as Abraham, Jacob, Noah, Solomon, David, Jesus, and Jesus's mother, Mary, as spiritual precursors.

While Christians believe that God's Word became human flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, Muslims believe that the Divine Word was revealed in recitations that took the form of a book. The "Book," both as recited reality and printed text, is the most sacred treasure in the life of Muslims because it is the premier form of Allah's presence and purpose in the created universe of nature and human experience.

Arabic as the language of the Qur'an is more than just one among many respectable liturgical languages for worship and devotion. Rather, Muslims believe that the Arabic Qur'an allows them actual participation in God's speech. That is why Qur'anic recitation must be performed as perfectly as possible.

That mandate is what *Koran by Heart* addresses so clearly and warmly through its wonderful young reciters, their teachers, the contest judges, and the faithful who witness their competitive performances on Egyptian national television and throughout the *Umma*.

Qur'an recitation contests are held periodically in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia, as well as in Egypt. Although Muslims greatly value the learning of Arabic, many in countries where Arabic is not the primary language learn to recite the scripture from memory by means of intense practice under the guidance of teachers. With proper training, Muslim children master the difficult sounds and rhythms by ear, even if they do not understand the text in its original Arabic. They learn the ritual requirements of pious recitation and then generally are brought to knowledge and understanding of the text through translations in their native languages.

The art of recitation is called in Arabic *'ilm al-tajweed*, "the science of euphonious recitation." It is also known by the technical terms *qirā'a* and *tilāwa*, each meaning

"recitation." There is a range of styles of recitation, from the plain, slow, strictly rhythmic *tarteel* all the way to the florid and "musical" chanting known as *mujawwad*. The recitation should never become music, however, in the sense of secular art song, for recitation is ideally not entertainment or human-centered musical performance. But gifted reciters do command wide and devoted followings, which have been greatly extended through the proliferation of electronic media.

Humanities Themes

Islam as a global religion: People of all races and ethnicities embrace Islam and the concept of the *Umma*—the global Islamic religious community.

Islam as a way of life: Muslims believe that their faith shapes all aspects of their daily lives—not only when they pray but what they eat and wear, where they live, and how they behave in public and private.

Islam, education, and children: Teaching the Qur'an is said to provide success in this life and the next, in that training the next generation in holy texts helps ensure the religion's future.

Sample Discussion Points

Why do you think this movie focuses on these particular young contestants in the recitation competition? Are their age, gender, and ethnicity important? Why does the filmmaker explore their home lives as well as their performance in the competition? How does their success in Cairo (or lack thereof) shape their lives and prospects back home?

Why is the International Holy Koran Competition held in Cairo? Why not in Saudi Arabia, in the holy cities of Mecca or Medina? Or in Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population? Does the film offer any potential answers or any particular insights into the place of Islam in Cairo and Egypt?

Why is chanting itself so important to the recitation of the Qur'an, and to this competition? Is melody mainly a tool to aid memorization? Are the rules of *tajweed* (recitation) similar to those governing the ways in which prayers are chanted and hymns sung in other religions?

When young people are trained to memorize the Qur'an, why is this teaching not necessarily linked to actually reading and translating the Arabic text, or analyzing the passages, or learning particular forms of Islamic belief? How is this training connected, or not, to literacy and religious education?

What else do we see in this documentary film beyond the Qur'an recitation contest? How does the filmmaker present architecture, clothing, food, social behavior, and ethnic and cultural diversity?

Does the film explore the tension between Islamic fundamentalism and the democratic ideals of the "Arab Spring"? Are these tensions visible in Cairo? What about in the home countries of the young contestants—the Maldives, Senegal, and Tajikistan?