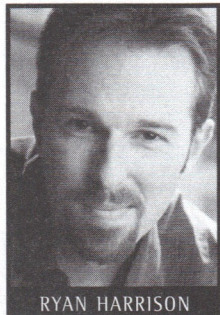


Strengthening faith through a different lens

Acrowded room full of children and teens, their parents, and judges; microphones, computer monitors, and video cameras; the chance to win a highly prestigious award. You'd think it was a national spelling bee or some kind of academic decathlon, but you'd be wrong . . . sort of.



RYAN HARRISON

Each year during the month-long Muslim holiday of Ramadan, more than 100 children ranging in age from 7 to 17 travel from all over the world to Cairo, where they compete against each other, calling on their knowledge of the 6,236 verses, 540 paragraphs, and 114 chapters of the Koran. Many of the musings, emotions, challenges, setbacks, and triumphs of three of the competition's most memorable partici-

pants—each only 10 years of age—are captured in film director/producer Greg Barker's masterful work *Koran by Heart*.

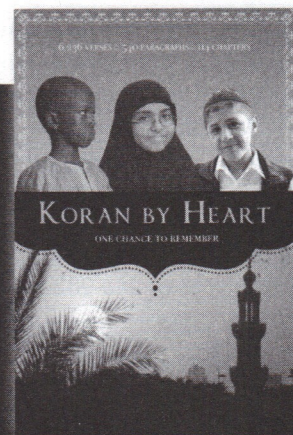
As the documentary takes you through a rich and diverse landscape that includes the Maldives, Senegal, Tajikistan, and other countries, a revelation slowly dawns. Although the faces, stories, and settings change, the sounds of Koranic recitation do not. Rather, you realize that this sacred practice of chanting represents the firm foundation that undergirds *all* of it—the culture, the competition, the relationships, the entire religious worldview—holding (if not tying) the narrative together with a beautifully complex oral tradition that stretches back thousands of years.

I teach a course in the music of world religions at the University of La Verne in La Verne, Calif. When we explore Islam, most of my students (who are primarily Christian) don't

know what to make of it initially. They invariably come to the subject with preconceptions, most of which aren't helpful to academic dialogue, let alone open-hearted learning. All the same, I have yet to have a student engage with the material without coming out on the other side feeling a deep, newfound respect for followers of Islam and for the dedication and faithfulness that accompany wholehearted devotion. When these same students take the extracurricular step of viewing *Koran by Heart*, this response is amplified significantly.

I have also introduced this film to my congregation, where it was screened as part of a semi-annual film-and-discussion event. Brethren are Christian, however. Why would *Koran by Heart* be of interest to this body of followers of Christ? What messages might it have for us?

One of the things that my students have taught me over the years is that investigating and learning about non-Christian religions can have a faith-fortifying effect. This is particularly true for those who come to such an endeavor with doubt, skepticism, or apprehension. More than a few times, students who had previously confided in me their fear of "cheating" on their Christian faith by studying Islam have returned to me at the course's end to tell me that their hearts had been opened and their own faith had been deepened. I like to think that what is happening in them is some kind of spiritual awakening where the boundaries between religious "right" and "wrong" are blurred by the fundamental truth that we are all children of God, worshiping in ways that connect us with sources of hope, strength, and love. *Koran by Heart* gives us the opportunity to relax our religious boundaries and to experience a kind of permeability that allows us to see these deeper, interreligious truths that connect us in unseen but powerful ways.




ABOUT THE MOVIE

Title: *Koran by Heart*. **HBO premiere:** August 1, 2011. **Running time:** 77 minutes. **Director:** Greg Barker. **Editor:** Langdon Page. **Produced by:** John Battsek and Julie Goldman. According to Mottopictures.com: "*Koran by Heart* is a film about the intense competition at the world's oldest Koran memorization contest, when the best and brightest kids from 70 countries across the Islamic world gather each year during Ramadan in Cairo, Egypt, to see who can recite the Koran with the greatest accuracy, passion, and beauty. Just 10 years old, the main characters are remarkable, talented boys and girls from remote and volatile parts of the Islamic world—their future hanging in the balance amidst the controversies and divisions that engulf as their religion. *Koran by Heart* is a coming of age story about Muslim kids in modern times." And, from Ian Hollander, writing in muslimmatters.org: "Following these talented youngsters from their intense preparation regimens through the rigorous rounds of the tournament, director Greg Barker creates both an inspirational competition film and an engaging survey of the unique experiences of Muslim children throughout the world, using the cultural crossroads of the international competition to examine the issues facing of the next generation of Muslims."

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Perhaps another thing to be learned from *Koran by Heart* is a lesson in gratitude, or humility, or both. You meet young Rifdha, a girl with a true soul-sparkle, a keen intellect, and a desire to expand her horizons and make a positive difference in the world. You also meet her father, a good and decent man who has other, more traditional plans for her future. When you discover that Djamil, a boy who has memorized the entire Koran, doesn't even understand Arabic, it's hard to not respect the years of focus, concentration, and practice that this young Muslim has displayed. And when you learn that Nabiollah, who can recite the Koran from a seemingly photographic memory, has placed Koranic memorization even above learning to read and write his own language, you wonder not only at his parents' aims, but the degree of meaning the Koran must have for this deeply committed child.

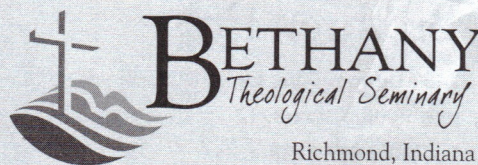
Koran by Heart is not a religious film in the sense that it does not preach. The closest it gets to sermonizing is when a well-known and esteemed Muslim scholar dispels many of the harmful misinterpretations that have flooded American airwaves since 9/11. Rather, *Koran by Heart* is a deeply spiritual film. It takes you into the experience of some of your Muslim brothers and sisters, emphasizes the degree of commitment and faith that many Christians secretly envy, and helps you reframe the way you think about Islam, the Koran, and how God reveals love and light around the world. 

Ryan Harrison attends the La Verne (Calif.) Church of the Brethren where he started and led monthly Spiritual Cinema Circle gatherings for more than five years. He now teaches "Spiritual Cinema" at the University of La Verne, and is currently pursuing a PsyD degree at the University of the Rockies.

Bethany Sunday September 16, 2012

Students, faculty, and staff are grateful for your prayers and support!

Remember Bethany as we equip spiritual and intellectual leaders to minister, proclaim, and live out God's shalom and Christ's peace.



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