

Opening doors to Islam

A UVic historian takes Western scholarship to the heart of the Islamic world

by Peigi McGillivray

An invitation to speak at an international academic gathering is nothing new for historian Dr. Andrew Rippin, who this summer wound up his 10-year term as dean of humanities at the University of Victoria.

But when the invitation comes from one of the most important centres of Islamic culture in the Middle East, and when only two other Western scholars will be there, it shows how widely respected Rippin's research is around the globe.

Rippin was invited to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria, Egypt, to speak at a recent conference on Egyptian cultural heritage. "The library is a major centre of cultural and scientific excellence in the Islamic world," he says. "I was honoured to be invited as one of such a small number of Western scholars."

One of the world's pre-eminent authorities in the field of Islamic studies, Rippin focuses his research on the interpretation of the Qur'an—the central religious text of Islam—and its core influence on Islamic civilization.

"It's vitally important that we in the West find ways to understand a culture that is shared by one-fifth of the world's population—and one that has such an impact on global events," he says.

Rippin says his work is inspired by curiosity. "I want to know more about the Qur'an, where it came from, what role it has played in Islamic culture, and how it has been interpreted through history."

Rippin contrasts this curiosity-based research approach with the respect-based research of Muslim scholars, who study the Qur'an as the final revelation of God and engage in a different kind of critical analysis.

"The two methods and motivations are very different," says Rippin. "But what is important is that we are able to have an interchange of ideas and listen to one another, even if we continue to not see eye-to-eye. That's why my invitation to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina was so significant to me."

At the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Rippin spoke to Muslim scholars from Egypt, Syria,

Qatar, Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Oman.

"While they remained skeptical about my motivation and approach, they listened to what I had to say. It felt like a door was opening, even if it may have had a lasting impact on just a few people."

Sharing his fascination with the world of Islam has informed Rippin's teaching and writing over his 30-year academic career. He teaches a fourth-year course on the foundations of Islam, and works with graduate students in the field of Islamic studies.

"There is a growing interest in Islamic studies in the West," says Rippin. "Here at UVic we've seen an increase in the number of students interested in Islamic history, culture, art and religion, and in the modern Middle East."

Rippin believes that building bridges between the Islamic world and the West is of vital importance. "Scholarship is a tool for creating greater understanding between our cultures," he says, "and that has never been more important than it is today."

EDGEwise

Islam is the predominant religion in the Middle East, North Africa and large parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. There are an estimated 1.57 billion Muslims worldwide, making it the second largest religion in the world, behind Christianity.

Muslims believe the Qur'an to be the book of divine guidance and direction for humanity. It influences virtually every aspect of Islamic life and society, including law, philosophy, science and technology, art, literature and film.

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina was built to commemorate the Library of Alexandria, a centre of scholarship that flourished from the third century BC.

Andrew Rippin has written or edited seven books, including *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (2001), *The Qur'an and its Interpretive Tradition* (2001), *The Islamic World* (2008) and the newly published *Islam in the Eyes of the West*.

UVic researchers were awarded more than \$104 million in outside research grants and contracts in 2008/09—more than double the research support of five years ago.

TIMES COLONIST
Your Island. Your Newspaper.

Supporting education in our community



We're going places.

University of Victoria Research