

OBITUARY: F. E. PETERS (1927–2020)

REUVEN FIRESTONE

Hebrew Union College and University of Southern California,
Los Angeles, USA

F. E. (Francis Edward) Peters, a scholar best known as a historian of religion, died on April 30, 2020 in New York at the age of 93. A native of New York City, Peters was trained in the Jesuit tradition, received his MA in Latin and Greek at St. Louis University, and received a licentiate degree in philosophy from the Pontifical Institute in Rome. After having been released from his Jesuit vows in 1954, he went on to earn a degree in Russian language studies at Fordham University and a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies from Princeton in 1961. He chaired both the Classics and Middle East Studies departments at New York University, where he taught for forty-seven years, retiring in 2008.

Peters was a leading scholar in the comparative study of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, a subject on which he wrote many dozens of essays and more than twenty books, including the two-volume *The Monotheists: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conflict and Competition* (2003), *The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (2004), and *The Voice, the Word, the Books: The Sacred Scriptures of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (2007). It was in the capacity of comparison that he first came to the academic study of the Qurʾān.

His academic and publishing career, however, began with Greek philosophy and its profound impact on Islamic intellectual and spiritual thought. As he put it in one of his memoir essays, “In Princeton’s Department of Oriental Studies, as it was called in those more innocent days ... I learned my still proud trade as an Orientalist—this was fifteen years before Edward Said appeared on the scene ... If ‘Western’ and ‘Oriental’ no longer seem quite so useful as cultural tags, it is because we have all come to understand that our boundaries were in reality far more osmotic than we, or the fathers of our disciplines who set them, once thought.” Peters wrote three books on the subject, *Aristotle and the Arabs* (1968), *Aristoteles Arabus: The Oriental Translations and Commentaries of the Aristotelian Corpus* (1968), and *The Harvest of Hellenism: A History of the Near East from Alexander the Great to the Triumph of Christianity* (1970), and he continued to return to this heavily value-laden but critically important subject throughout his career, refining his observations through the years.

This interest in the sharing of heritage and ideas brought him to the subject of Jerusalem, the contested holy city for the three scriptural monotheisms. He wrote four books on Jerusalem, one of them a study of “the holy city in the eyes of chroniclers, visitors, pilgrims, and prophets” (1985). And it was in and through Jerusalem that Peters entered the field of shared and contested discourse between the Abrahamic religions. He wrote a book on Jerusalem and Mecca as types of Near Eastern holy cities (1986), followed by one on Mecca (1994) and another on the *hajj* (1994) by anthologizing the views and perspectives of pilgrims and other observers from Abraham to the Saudi monarchy. He wrote three large volumes on the classical writings of the major scriptural monotheisms, *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: The Classical Texts and Their Interpretation* (1990), and two more mentioned above (*The Monotheists* in 1994 and *The Voice, the Word, the Books* in 2007). Peters worked with the Qur’ān, both its pre-history and its reception history, in many of the works mentioned above. Of direct interest in this category are also his “The Quest of the Historical Muhammad” (1991), *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (1994), and *Jesus and Muhammad: Parallel Tracks, Parallel Lives* (2011).

His work on what is both shared and contested religious discourse is not only perceptive and articulate, it also serves as a lucid and fearless critique and deconstruction of many assumptions made both by religious and secular scholars. He called things as he saw them in relation to all three traditions and without beating around the bush, but always in elegant prose that was revealing of his critical wit and sometimes a somewhat cavalier tone. Without privileging any, it would be fair to note that his work could make any Jew, Christian, or Muslim occasionally uncomfortable, whether religious or not.

Peters also wrote a beautiful little book called *Ours: The Making and Unmaking of a Jesuit* (1981). Written in a satirical register that subtly infuses much of his other work as well, *Ours* likened his experience as a novice in the Society of Jesus to playing on a baseball team. His sharp wit, sardonic humor, and delightful prose make his works accessible to large audiences. The insights he offers will impact scholarship on the Qur’ān in its historical and literary context for a long time to come.