



## *The PHI BETA KAPPA Society*

2008 Book Awards  
Presented in Williamsburg, Virginia

### **Winner of The Ralph Waldo Emerson Award**

*Leor Halevi, Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007)*

*Excerpts from the Ceremony*

**Dr. Allison Blakely**

George and Joyce Wein Professor at Boston University  
President of the Phi Beta Kappa Society

*The Ralph Waldo Emerson Award was established in 1960 to recognize comprehensive studies that contribute significantly to historical, philosophical or religious interpretations of the human condition.*

**Dr. Don J. Wyatt**

Professor of History, Middlebury College

Phi Beta Kappa Senator

*Magisterial... Muhammad's Grave can be said to be nothing less than a tour de force....*

*In his ostensibly unassuming book, Leor Halevi has scratched very deeply beneath the surface and exposed the profound significance of what may well be the defining markers of every great civilization -- and these are not so much the rituals and ceremonies associated with how we live, but instead those associated with how we die.*

*The contextual backdrop against which Halevi achieves these objectives in intellectual excavation is Islam in its formative stage of the seventh and eighth centuries, particularly as the religion took shape in and around the Arabian [peninsula].... Within this geographical crucible, Halevi employs the phenomenon of death as touchstone and bridge to almost every conceivable area of social enterprise, especially law and the various cultural practices that came to hinge upon it, but also to a lesser extent economics and political culture....*

*As is the case in one's encounter with any great work, one perceives complex matrices, of themes at work in Muhammad's Grave, all of them operative on multiple levels. On the most basic of levels, Leor Halevi presents us with a comprehensive explanation of how and why the pious consciously and continually manipulated prevailing burial practices in order to make them more Islamic, and less tribal, in a period when the new religion of Islam was just emerging. However, on another, more sublime level, when Halevi poses to us (as readers) the seemingly mundane questions that his subjects of that distant time must have asked themselves... we aptly sense that something much larger is at work. To be sure, to cite one of the judges of this year's Emerson prize in this respect, "his largest theme is the making of Islam itself. Halevi helps*

*us understand how the making of death as a cultural reality in a religious community is fundamental to the construction of that community's deepest identity."*

*Thus, with gratitude, ladies and gentlemen, for the result of his labors in this exceptional endeavor, a more deserving recipient of the Emerson Award we could hardly have.*

Complete Text on Podcast:

<http://www.pbk.org/home/playpodcast.aspx?id=187>

Professor Blakely's Comments: 23:18-23:44

Professor Wyatt's Comments: 23:45-29:27