

# I S L A M

**RE 215 (AB)**

Tues & Thurs 9:40-11:00 AM  
Classroom: Ladd 206

**Prof. G. Spinner**

gspinner@skidmore.edu  
office: Ladd 321  
office phone: 580-8406  
office hrs: Wed 2:00-3:00 PM,  
or by appt.

## ***Course Description***

This course provides a basic introduction to Islamic scripture, law and spirituality. Our approach is historical, undertaking a critical investigation of both texts and contexts, in an attempt to understand and analyze the lived reality of Islam past and present. Roughly one out of every five people on this planet identify as Muslim, and yet Americans know relatively little about a religious tradition having such a profound and lasting influence on world history and culture and continuing to impact contemporary events. Whereas media images tend to distort its message and dilute its meanings, we will give Islam far more careful consideration, approaching this religion as the rich and multi-faceted tradition that it is. Taking a global perspective, we will encounter Islam in action, from Indonesia to Arabia to Senegal to Pakistan to Trinidad and many points in between. Covering some core beliefs and practices shared by most Muslims, we will emphasize the complexity and diversity of Muslim life, as various Muslim cultures interpret and implement Islam in different ways.

## ***Course Materials***

Required books include:

Frederick Denny, *An Introduction to Islam*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition.  
Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

A recommended text is *The Qur'an*, as translated by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem. There are no assigned readings from this book, but you may want to have a copy of the Qur'an around to occasionally consult. This is simply one reliable translation, yet there are certainly others; consult Sells pp. 231-232 for more about English renditions of the Qur'an.

All other required readings will be made available as a Course Reader.

## ***Studying Religion***

In studying Islam as a global "religion," we are selecting certain beliefs, practices and institutions and situating them within an academic rubric, namely that of "Religious Studies." So a few underlying premises of the discipline should be stated at the outset. First, it must be made clear that any course in Religious Studies intends neither to promote nor demote any type of religious beliefs or activities. Rather, one can distinguish being educated *about* religion from being indoctrinated *for* or *against* religion. Second, one begins studying any tradition by seeking to understand that tradition as it understands itself, and recognizing that any tradition speaks with a plurality of voices. Third, we are not compelled to agree with the voices encountered in our

study, although it is hoped that some may command our respect. Our primary intention in Religious Studies is to think about religion critically, although not unsympathetically. This *critical* approach means being analytical, rather than simply being judgmental; we are not looking to gut-level reactions, but asking instead for measured reflections. Fourth, the study of religion is ideally suited to further our understanding of history, culture and human identity. In learning about religion, we see how religions orient their practitioners in space and time, providing personal meanings and structuring societies. We observe how religions exercise authority over people even as they empower people to deal with everyday dilemmas or to act under extraordinary circumstances. We discover that religions are not timeless and unchanging, but develop in history, whether viewed in its epic sweep or in its quotidian specificity. We find then that religions are *embedded* in particular cultures, just as they are *embodied* by those who practice them. In short, we seek to uncover important dimensions of the human experience and to subject them to critical inquiry, divested of preconceptions and prejudices.

### ***Course Requirements***

Your grade consists of the following components:

|                          |              |
|--------------------------|--------------|
| <b>Participation</b>     | <b>10 %</b>  |
| <b>Reflection Papers</b> | <b>40 %</b>  |
| <b>First Exam</b>        | <b>25 %</b>  |
| <b>Final Exam</b>        | <b>25 %</b>  |
| <hr/>                    |              |
| <b>Total</b>             | <b>100 %</b> |

While the course will begin with some lectures, we'll quickly move into a discussion format, where your **participation** is imperative, and for which you will be duly evaluated. So participation is not a "gimme," as it requires a strong and continual effort throughout the semester. Our goal is have a sustained and thoughtful conversation about this topic, and this will not be achieved through dispirited or half-hearted attempts. So: understand that ***attendance is mandatory***. You should make every effort to always be at class (and to be on time, and not leave prematurely). Of course, participation is far more than showing up. It is an active engagement: you must have done the reading and be prepared to discuss it. It is talking with and listening to others: you will be an integral part of that conversation. You should have questions; you should have comments; above all, you should have curiosity. We are going to think through some difficult materials together, and I expect each and every one of you to have something to contribute to that collaboration. *Real education is not a spectator sport.*

**Reflection Papers** are short pieces of writing (3-5 paragraphs, at least 2 pages) in which you respond to questions that I distribute ahead of time. You will be writing several reflection papers throughout the semester. We will use these papers as jumping off points for discussion, but you will also turn them in, and they will be graded.

**Exams** are essays of moderate length. I will say more about effective essay writing and developing your ideas once the semester is under way.

If you think you have a reasonable need for an extension, then it behooves you to make the case for one *before* the assignment is due. Otherwise, late work will be marked down. I will deduct

half a letter grade for each day an assignment is late. All papers and exams must be submitted in hard-copy form, unless prior arrangements are made with the instructor.

So, here's the tally: you have to come to class, participating consistently, which means you have to do *all* of the readings, and talk about them, just as you have to turn your writing assignments in on time. Clearly I expect you to work; but it is also my intention that we have fun doing so.

### ***Classroom Civility***

Don't be late, and don't be rude. I hope that we will engage each other in open and honest ways, but both our speech and our demeanor should reflect common courtesy for those around us. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior will promptly result in being asked to leave the class.

Feel free to bring a beverage or snack, and, if you are so inclined, enough to share. I just ask that your eating and drinking does not interfere with our learning.

Turn off cell phones and any other small electronic devices before you come to class. Take your headphones off, and stow anything that texts or beeps well out of sight. I will start the semester out by allowing the use of laptops, as some students prefer to take their notes this way, but I will promptly rescind this permission if I feel that people are paying more attention to their computer screen than to class. In short, anything that might provide a distraction to the user, to other students or to the instructor will not be indulged.

### ***Honor Code***

I expect you to live up to Skidmore's Honor Code and strictly avoid any forms of academic dishonesty. Copying from others, submitting someone else's work as your own, or submitting your same work for two different courses are all forms of cheating. Any fact, word or thought that originated with somebody else must be promptly and properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such. Suspected infractions of the Honor Code will be duly reported to the Dean of Academic Advising.

### ***Partners in Learning***

To my mind, this syllabus establishes a kind of social contract, in which you and I agree to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment. I hope that at the core of this agreement we find a mutual interest in critical inquiry, a passion for increased understanding, and an abiding commitment to respectful disagreement. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I simply ask that you be civil, even as I will push you to be honest and open in your thinking.

I trust that with this syllabus I have made clear my expectations, and that if I have not, you will call me to account. I also ask that you make your expectations clear to me, and let me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. You may always ask questions; I will not mind if you ask me to repeat something or to clarify a point. Feel free to come by my office, or to contact me by e-mail or phone, in order to discuss any matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

# ISLAM

## CLASS & READING SCHEDULE

### RE 215 / FALL 2010

*Please Note:* you should have the assigned readings done **before** you come to the class for which they have been assigned.

**CR** = Course Reader

**D** = Denny, Introduction to Islam

Sept 7. **Introductions:** syllabus, classmates, instructor.

Sept 9. No class: Rosh ha-Shanah.

Sept 14. **Abrahamic Religions before Muhammad.** Reading: D, pp. 15-28 and 32-44.

Sept 16. **The Prophet Muhammad: His Life & Sunna.**

Reading: D, pp. 49-72, 150-155 and mid 160-163.

Sept 21. **After Muhammad: The Caliphate.** Reading: D, pp. 74-95.

Sept 23. **Qur'an. Reading Signs, Heeding Warnings.**

Readings: D, pp. 130-mid 134. Sells, pp. 1-28, 42-55 and 74-77.

Listening: Sells, tracks 2 & 23, while consulting pp. 172-173.

Sept. 28: *Opportunity for extra credit*

**Relli Shechter**, Greenberg Middle East Scholar in Residence, *will be speaking on*

"Consumerism and Islamism: The Middle East Since the 1970s"

at 8 pm in Davis Auditorium.

Sept 28. **Quranic Recitation.** Reading: Sells, pp. 84-93, 145-157 and 161-165.

Also read Denny (CR). Listening: tracks 9 & 24, consulting pp. 174-184.

Sept 30. **Quranic Study, Interpretation & Calligraphy.**

Readings: D, pp. 139-148. Mattson (CR) and Nasr (CR).

Oct 5. **Pillars. Shahada & Salat.** Reading: D, pp. 99-mid 116.

Listening: Sells, tracks 1 & 32, while consulting pp. 166-171.

Oct 7. **Pillars. Zakat & Sawm.** Reading: D, pp. 116-121. Armbrust (CR).

Oct 12. **Pillars. Hajj.** Reading: D, pp. 122-128. Wolf (CR) and Shariati (CR).

Oct 14. **Pillars. Hajj, continued.** Reading: Wolf and Shariati, second selections (CR).

Oct 19. **Ulama: Lawyers & Theologians.**

Reading: D, pp. 164-179, 187-194 and mid 198-207.

Oct 21. **Sufis: Mystics & Saints.** Reading: D, pp. 211-235 and 301-306.

**CLASS & READING SCHEDULE,**  
*continued*

- Oct 26. **Sufis: Masters, Disciples & Dervishes.**  
Reading: D, pp. 238- top 256. Rumi (CR).
- Oct 28. **Sufis: The Mourides of Senegal.** Reading: TBA.
- Nov 2. **Muharram in India.** Reading: Pinault, first selection (CR).
- Nov 4. **Muharram in India (*continued*) & North America.**  
Reading: Pinault, second selection (CR) and Schubel (CR).
- Nov 9. **Muharram in Trinidad.** Reading: Korom (CR).
- Nov 11. **Living a Muslim Life. Family & Food.** Reading: D, pp. 263-287.
- Nov 16. **The Status of Women.** Reading: D, pp. 348-352 and mid 377-379.  
Also read Wadud (CR) and Mernissi (CR).
- Nov 18. **Wearing Veils.** Reading: Taylor (CR).
- Nov 23. **Reforms & Revivals.** Reading: D, pp. 315-339. Ramadan (CR).
- Nov 25. No class: Thanksgiving Break.
- Nov 30. **Jihad, Then & Now.** Reading: Cook, Qutb and Bin Laden (all in CR).  
Also read D, pp. 341-347 and 367-top 371.
- Dec 2. **Progressive Islam.** Reading: D, pp. mid 371-mid 377 and 380. El- Fadl (CR)
- Dec 7. **“Muhammad Was a Punk Rocker”: Taqwacores.**  
Reading: D, pp. mid 352-top 358, and Knight (CR).
- Dec 9. Conclusions.