

I S L A M

RE 215 (AB)

Tues & Thurs 9:40-11:00 AM
Classroom: Tisch 304

Prof. G. Spinner

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office: Ladd 321

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office hrs: Tues 1:30-2:30,

Wed 1:00-2:00, *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*, 4th edition.

Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*, 2nd 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 information 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:

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

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 *Real education is not a spectator sport*, and each and every one of you is expected to contribute to our collective efforts at thinking through unfamiliar and sometimes difficult materials.

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 take-home 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.

To sum up these requirements: clearly, I expect you to work. But I think the workload is appropriate, and I trust that we can have fun working through it together.

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 eating and drinking do 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.

Academic Integrity

I have a zero tolerance policy for any form of intellectual dishonesty. Make sure your work is entirely your own, and that you give credit to any ideas or formulations that originate with others. Plagiarism is a serious violation of academic integrity, whether fully intentional or not. Recall that Skidmore's Honor Code does not accept ignorance or error as adequate defense for violations; on this, see cms.skidmore.edu/writing_guide/honor_code.cfm. Suspected infractions will be reported to the Dean of Studies to investigate.

Student Disabilities

I am happy to make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you believe you will need it, then you must formally request academic accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, and provide documentation verifying your disability. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.

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

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CLASS & READING SCHEDULE

RE 215 / FALL 2011

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 8. **Introductions:** syllabus, classmates, instructor.
- Sept 13. **Abrahamic Religions before Muhammad.** Reading: D, pp. 15-28 and 32-44.
- Sept 15. **The Prophet Muhammad: His Life & Sunna.**
Reading: D, pp. 49-72, 150-155 and mid 160-163.
- Sept 20. *Opportunity for extra credit*
Daniella Talmon-Heller, Greenberg Middle East Scholar in Residence,
will be speaking on “Jerusalem in Islamic Thought and History,”
at 8 pm in Davis Auditorium.
- Sept 20. **After Muhammad: Caliphate, Civil Wars & Empire.**
Reading: D, pp. 74-95.
- Sept 22. **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 27. **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 29. *No class:* Rosh ha-Shanah.
- Oct 4. **Quranic Study, Interpretation & Calligraphy.** Readings: D, pp. 139-148.
Hadith of Gabriel (CR) and Nasr (CR).
- Oct 6. **Pillars. Shahada & Salat.** Readings: D, pp. 99-mid 116. Mattson (CR).
Listening: Sells, tracks 1 & 32, while consulting pp. 166-171. On You
Tube, view the “Step-by-Step Guide to Prayer” posted by Shaykha. It is
laid out in seven parts; just watch the first 3 units (wudu, reminders &
fajr), starting with:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaKb2zX1QBs&feature=relmfu.
- Oct 11. **Pillars. Zakat & Sawm.** Readings: D, pp. 116-121. Armbrust (CR).
- Oct 13. **Pillars. Hajj.** Readings: D, pp. 122-128. Wolf (CR) and Shariati (CR).

ISLAM

CLASS & READING SCHEDULE, *continued*

- Oct 18. **Pillars. Hajj, continued.** Reading: Wolf and Shariati, second selections (CR).
- Oct 20. **Ulama: Lawyers, Theologians & Philosophers.**
Reading: D, pp. mid 166-179, 185, 187-194 and (*optionally*) mid 198-207.
Also read Ibn Rushd (CR).
- Oct 25. **Sufis: Mystics & Saints.** Reading: D, pp. 211-235 and 301-306.
- Oct 27. **Sufis: Masters, Disciples & Dervishes.**
Readings: D, pp. 238- top 256. Rumi (CR).
- Nov 1. **Sufis: Senegalese Mourides & American Sufis.**
Readings: Roberts & Roberts (CR), Karp (CR) and Babou (CR).
- Nov 3. **Blood & Tears: Muharram in India.** Reading: Pinault, first selection (CR).
- Nov 8. **Blood & Tears: Muharram in India (*continued*) & North America.**
Readings: Pinault, second selection (CR) and Schubel (CR).
- Nov 10. **Blood & Tears: Muharram in Trinidad.** Reading: Korom (CR).
- Nov 15. **Family Life & the Status of Women.** Reading: D, pp. 263-287 and 348-352.
Also read Wadud (CR).
- Nov 17. **Wearing Veils.** Reading: Taylor (CR).
- Nov 22 & 24. *No classes held this week:*
American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting,
followed by Thanksgiving Break.
- Nov 29. **Reforms, Revivals & Progressive Islam.** Readings: D, pp. 315-321, 371-373
and (*optionally*) pp. 324-339. Also Ramadan (CR) and El- Fadl (CR).
- Dec 1. **Jihad, Then & Now.** Readings: Cook, Qutb and Bin Laden (all in CR).
Also read D, pp. 341-347 and 367-top 371.
- Dec 6. **“Muhammad Was a Punk Rocker”:** Taqwacores.
Readings: D, pp. mid 352-362, and Knight (CR).
- Dec 8. Conclusions.